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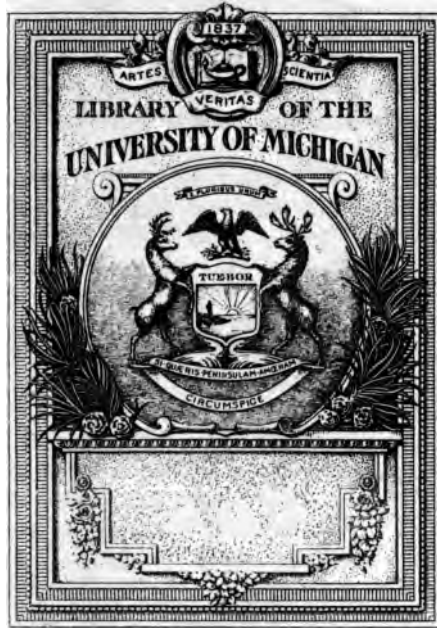
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RED HORSE HILL

SIDNEY M^CCALL



THE GIFT OF
Mrs. F. Lustfield.



19

only

RED HORSE HILL



RED HORSE HILL

BY

SIDNEY McCALL

*Author of "Truth Dexter," "The Breath of the Gods,"
"The Dragon Painter," etc.*

Fenollosa, Mrs. H. H. (1878)

BOSTON

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1909

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To the memory of my beloved

Gift
Mrs F. Smithfield
7-17-28

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RED HORSE HILL

CHAPTER ONE

MARRIED LOVERS

"I AM expected to believe that this is March?" asked the man, affecting incredulity.

"And only the first day of it!" she cried, in triumph.

He took his eyes, with pardonable reluctance, from his wife's laughing, upturned face, and gazed out on the world again, a world soaked up with yellow sunshine, caught under an inverted bowl of blue glaze. "Except for your assurance and the date on the morning paper, I would believe it to be May," he told her.

"Oh, there is no real sunshine anywhere in America except here, in my South," she vaunted. One would have thought from her manner that the credit of the perfect morning lay entirely at her door. She leaned her dark head against him, speaking in a lower tone. "These are the days that one remembers,—these little, herald days of spring, that run out from under the coop, as it were, while old prisoned winter clucks and frets. They are the dearest ones of all."

"If this is a sample of the flock," said he, "I readily believe it."

"That's just the trouble," she laughed. "It is only a sample. In a little while the March winds will wake up, and rattle our doors and windows, and blow red dust about the streets, making us forget the darling days that went astray. Yet, even at that, think of Broadway as it is this minute, — all those side streets piled with snow and mud. Ugh!" she shuddered.

Her husband smiled. "New York is New York. There's only one. I wonder whether I shall ever get used to spending the winters away from it."

"I wonder too," she echoed, a little sadly. Then, after an imperceptible hesitation, added, "I feared you never would. That was why I opposed our coming here."

She stared out again, straight into the sunshine.

"It is certain that you opposed it vehemently," he responded, after a brief interval of silence which, for some indefinable reason was not altogether tranquil. "It was one of the surprises of my life. And now that I have seen you in the South, and realize how homesick you must have been, I wonder even more."

She stirred restlessly. "It's that wretched business of mill management," she said. "You know you hated to come, and I think it was horrid of your partners to force you into coming!"

Dwight Alden frowned. "There's no use going over all that again. No one else could come or I should have held out longer." He glanced down at her averted face with something like curiosity. "Perhaps the most surprising shock of the whole business was in finding how set you were against returning to your own part of the country."

"I told you it was because I knew you wouldn't like it," she repeated, a little defiantly. Plainly the

topic was one that distressed her. She moved a few inches farther and began to toy nervously with the draperies at the window. The next words came more as if she feared a protracted silence, than from any definite necessity of speaking. "I have given you often the only personal reasons I had; my relatives are dead, the friends of my childhood changed. It is sadder to come back than to remain away when such things have happened."

"If you had been born in this State I could understand it better, but North Carolina, — two hundred miles from here —"

"The people of the old South are like one big family. Everybody knows everybody."

"But why shouldn't they?" he was beginning, logically enough, when her impatient exclamation checked him. For an instant longer he bent on her the puzzled gaze, noting her pallor, the quickness of her breathing, and the nervous fluttering of her hands. He was not satisfied; nothing she had since alleged for her sudden, passionate protest against taking up residence in the South had satisfied him, but now, because she was troubled, and because he dearly loved her, he deliberately drove the unpleasant subject from his mind. Even before he reached out his arm to draw her close, she had felt the change and welcomed it with a deep drawn sigh of relief.

He was a tall man, sparely built, with broad shoulders. Beside him she seemed a girl in slenderness and height. He had the peculiar air of "correctness," the quick decision of glance and of motion which characterize the well-born business man of the North. Outwardly, at least, the husband and wife possessed every requisite for comfort and happiness. Both were young and good to look at. Now, after three

years of married life, they were more deeply in love than at the beginning. Also the house in which they stood, with its long rooms, rich furniture and elaborate stables, spoke loudly, perhaps a little too loudly, of wealth.

And it was just this house, with its brief and tragic history, centering about the sudden death of its owner and builder a few weeks earlier in the year, that was bringing the first small shadow of mistrust between Dwight Alden and Maris, his wife.

Mr. Geoffry Brattle, the late owner, had been senior partner of the New York firm of Brattle, King, and Alden. To go a little deeper into antecedents, his father, one Jonathan Brattle of Connecticut, and the millionaire proprietor of several cotton mills, had been among the first of those astute old pioneers to see the advantage of manufacturing the staple, with cheaper labor, in the locality where it grew. His Southern mill, called "The Regina," at first a private affair, had been, on its inheritance by the son Geoffry, incorporated into a stock company in which, of course, the firm of Brattle, King and Alden held the controlling interest.

The running of this mill and the constant increase of its percentages gradually became to Geoffry Brattle, as they had been to his father, the most engrossing factors in his material life. A certain weakness of the throat, deepening toward middle age, gave excellent reason for the changing of his residence from New York, to a milder climate. To this somewhat radical move his wife, inspired by her fears for his health, immediately assented. If the three Misses Brattle, each unmarried, and beyond the age of thirty, ventured to remonstrate, their expostulations bore no fruit. Once in the South, their interest in the building of a palatial new home

blotted out dissatisfaction. "The Regina," as Mr. Brattle had observed, was the oldest and the biggest mill in Sidon; and its President's home, if not the oldest, should at least be the most imposing in the community.

The so-called "classic" style had been chosen for its dominant note. The mansion faced to the south, and its four splendid monoliths, chipped from a native quarry, spanned the width of the brick façade. It stood on the apex of a low, trailing hill, and the unfinished garden was bounded, some thirty yards away, by an openwork iron fence and gateway. Outside the fence, after a dozen level yards at either hand, the red clay road went down to east and west, and the gray, cemented bands of narrow pavement followed the falling curves.

With the ardor of a boy had Mr. Geoffrey Brattle thrown himself into the pleasant task of furnishing and decorating his new home. The hardwood floors, selected in the North, the wall-papers and hangings imported direct from England, the placing of splendid colonial furniture, much of it already in the possession of the Brattle family, these details, and others, drew him away, for the first time, from active interest in his mill. Complaints were brought in to him only to be waved aside. "My superintendent, McGhee, will attend to it," was his invariable reply. So "Buck" McGhee, the hardest and most successful "mill boss" in the county, attended to things in his own way, while Mr. Brattle talked for long hours together with his landscape architect, a promising young graduate from the Massachusetts "Tech," and forgot that, in his mill, human life as well as steel machinery, sometimes gets out of repair.

And then (for such things are allowed to happen) scarcely had the last picture been hung in place, and

the door-mats been laid symmetrically before the two great panels of cut glass, when Mr. Brattle took a severe cold, probably from walking too long on his unfinished pathways, and, in three days, was dead.

The news of this calamity brought, as might have been expected, a manifold consternation to the New York office. For months the earnings of the mill had been falling behind. Something must be done immediately. As a result of the hasty first meeting of shareholders, it was voted that one of their number must take charge at once. The second partner, King, had even more complicated affairs to settle in the North. There was no one to go but the junior partner, Alden. He opposed it vigorously, but his clear judgment had seen, from the first, the inevitability of the move. And as if to dispel his last objection the heart-broken Mrs. Brattle wrote urging upon him and his wife the possession of the splendid home, just completed. "Live in it as long as you will," she had said. "I never want to see the place again."

So, less than three weeks ago, the Aldens had come, each under protest to a compelling fate, each filled with vague forebodings that lurked as a mist in the corners of the great house by day, and stirred at nightfall with a keener chill.

"Yo' mornin's mail, Sir," said the voice of Archer, the young negro butler, just behind them. Maris gave a little start of alarm, then drew away from her husband, while Alden took the letters, shuffling them hastily, like a deck of cards. "You can go, Archer," he said, "and next time you had better knock before entering."

"Yas, Sir," said Archer, meekly. "I did knock on dem do'-curtains, Sir, but dey wouldn't knock."

He turned away, still grave, but as he went down the room Maris caught the gleam of white teeth reflected in a mirror at the farther end.

Alden continued to frown over his letters. "All business ones, and all troublesome, of course," he had begun to murmur, when suddenly his face changed. "Hullo! Here's one from Wellesley. That means Ruth. Wonder what she wants now!" He opened it quickly, and, as he read, his lips formed themselves into a soundless whistle.

"What is it? Does she say she is coming to the South?" cried Maris, instantly alert with an uneasy curiosity.

Dwight smiled at her over the letter. "You witch. Now how did you guess that? It is the last thing I should have thought of Ruth's doing. But read for yourself."

Maris took the missive. She knew that Dwight watched her as she read, and determined to let no word or look of annoyance escape her. In her heart she could have wished that her young sister-in-law, hitherto so chary of her visits, had waited until affairs were a little more settled in the new Southern home.

Ruth, though still little more than a girl in years, was instructor in Sociology at Wellesley. Her life and intellect, she let it be understood, were dedicated to the betterment of her fellow-beings. The steady growth of interest at the North in all such problems of social science, particularly in that of Child Labor, had taken form, at Wellesley, in the organization of a Committee of Inquiry and Inspection. Ruth had been, from the first, an ardent member of this association. When her brother was transferred so suddenly to the South and given charge of one of the oldest and most important mills in that part of

the world, it naturally occurred to Ruth that here was a marvellous opportunity for studying conditions at first hand. In writing, she did not ask her brother's permission to come, or even hint that she desired his approval; she merely stated that she had applied for and received a two months' leave of absence, and would probably arrive some time during the following week. Almost as an after-thought, she had added: "I trust that this will not inconvenience you and Maris, and that you can find room for me in your big house."

"We can certainly find room, if that is what she wants," said Maris, handing the letter back. She tried to laugh naturally, but her voice, in spite of effort, sounded a little rueful.

Dwight made no reply to this. After a moment more of silence he turned from the window, saying, "It's a bit cold here, even with the sash down. Let us go over to the fire."

She slipped her arm in his and they made their way, thus, across the wide luxurious room until they reached the fire-place where, with a sigh of well-being, he sank into a cushioned seat and stretched his long legs out toward the blaze. Andirons of brass held back the hickory logs. The wood burned slowly, its charred sides marked off into luminous dice of coals. Now and again a small blue flame peered out, glanced hurriedly to right and left, reached up its hands to climb the imprisoning log, gained the glowing parapet and, like an elemental sprite, ran the full length of it, only to vanish, sprite-like, into the cavern of darkness beyond.

Maris took her favorite seat on the arm of her husband's chair, leaning against him until her cheek pressed close against his forehead. So, for a long, contented interval they sat in the silence which is

the ultimate gift alike of friendship and of love. When next the wife spoke it was of their present home and their coming life in it. "Do you know, Dwight, this is the very first day that this huge, expensive castle has had to me the least tiny hint of a home. And I have worked hard for it all through the week, hunting up flowers, and less pretentious vases, making Archer find a place where we could get these hickory logs, and a dozen other things that you don't notice now they are here, but which I think you would miss if they were taken away." She looked about the pleasant room, but her husband looked only at her.

"There is only one thing in the room I would miss very, very much," he told her.

"Oh, all this long, tiresome week I have been looking forward to this day," she answered, almost with passion, as she returned his caresses. "All the week I have been whispering to myself, 'Sunday is coming. He won't be going to that horrid mill. He's to be mine, all day, — all day!'" A plaintive note came into her voice. "I didn't dream, then, that it would be our last Sunday together for so many weeks."

Mr. Alden's sigh answered her own. "I can't help wishing that Ruth had waited a little longer. It would have been more considerate."

"But your reason," began Maris with the demureness that always hid a spice of mischief, "is only because you are not ready yet to turn her theories loose in your mill."

"Not altogether that," he said. "Her theories can well cut their teeth on the problems of other mills in the vicinity. There are plenty of others."

"What is it then?" she whispered. "Why is it that you don't want her to come so soon?" Her cheek was on his again, her arms were wound tightly around his throat. Suddenly he drew her down and

covered her face with kisses. "You know the reason well enough, you little rogue. Don't you ever get tired of hearing me say it?"

"No, — I have never heard it before, — say it, — say it — quick!"

"I'm such a fool, then, about this wife of mine, I don't want any one else butting in, — not even a sister. I think I'd like to rent a desert island, just for that wife and me, — if — " He paused, smiling.

"Yes — yes," she urged him, hungrily.

"If we could rely upon certain necessities, — open-plumbing, for instance, and a cook."

Maris sprang to her feet and faced him with flashing eyes. "That's not love!" she cried. "That's only a heightening of personal comfort into pleasure. Real love would scorn the plumbers, and the cooks, and all the machinery of life. For you, — for you," she said in her low, passionate voice, "I'd leave this great house this instant, not knowing or caring whether I should ever eat, or sleep, or be warm again. Because you asked it, I'd follow you on foot; and when I couldn't walk, I'd crawl, and when I wasn't able to crawl, — " here she stopped and gave an hysterical little laugh at the thought of the image about to be invoked, — "when I couldn't crawl, — I'd lie down flat and — *wriggle!* "

"Fortunately for us both I shall not ask it," he said, a little drily. He never felt at ease before these infrequent outbursts of his wife, even when, as now, they stirred him. He reached out to draw her back, but evading his touch, she threw herself to her knees upon the hearth-rug, caught up the brass poker, and began to make vicious thrusts into the astonished fire. The hiss and crackle of the angry sparks appeased her.

"There now!" she cried. "The fire has done the

sputtering for me. I'm better." She put the poker back deliberately, folded her hands in her lap, and sat, like a child, staring into the new rush of flame. He leaned over to see her the better; his face, unguarded, showed his delight in her elfin ways.

"What a kid you are yet, Maris," he laughed.

She shrugged and moved a little farther. In the new attitude her profile was cut, like a cameo, against the sooty background of the wide fireplace. It was a delicate, irregular outline, gaining its greatest charm from the sensitiveness of nostril and the unusual tilt of the short upper lip which seemed always about to tremble into a smile, or to break into eager speech. Sometimes an unspeakable pathos touched it.

But this look was far from it now. It was a spirited, defiant little profile thrown upward to his gaze. He watched her steadily, his eyes sparkling. He knew that, before many moments, she must turn to him, must meet his laughing eyes, showing the dark and ever changing beauty of her own. Yet, three years after marriage, he confessed to himself that he knew, less than a perplexed lover, just what fleeting impulse of fancy would make her turn. She was a creature of infinite variety, of subtle tendernesses, of unexpected rebuffs. Deepest of all in her, lay, as he knew, the passion of her love for him. As for the superficial Maris, she was a wind-blown aspen tree of moods.

Suddenly she wheeled to him with a motion not unlike that of the flames she had been watching, clasped his two knees with her hands, rested her chin upon them, set two great, sombre eyes upon his face, and challenged, — "What would you do for me, Dwight, — to prove the greatness of your love for me, — if ever a test should come?"

"What sort of a test?" manlike, he inquired.

She frowned and shook her head impatiently, her

gaze falling from his. A look, almost of sullenness, clouded her face for an instant, and vanished into sadness. She sighed, and lifted one hand to push back a long strand of hair. Her next words were a complete surprise. "Ruth never liked me from the first," she said.

Alden caught at the new and tangible subject. "Ruth never permits herself to like people until she has diagnosed their souls and ascertained their theories of nutrition," he answered lightly. "She never lets her sentiments get ahead of her even with the leash on. But she's a fine girl, for all that!"

"She is, — I feel she is, though she keeps me at such a distance. And she's too pretty to waste herself on being a professor in a girls' school. If it was a boys' school, now! She must be terribly intellectual. I can't even remember the name of the thing she's professor of," concluded Maris, mournfully, but whether the sorrow was for herself or Ruth, the listener could only guess.

"She's assistant instructor in Sociology," he told her, "and that is only another way of saying that they feel themselves privileged to poke into everybody's business but their own." It was Dwight's turn, now, to frown. "Ruth will have to understand, from the first, that I can't have her making trouble in the Regina Mill, — not, at least, until I have mastered conditions there a little better for myself."

"What sort of trouble could she make for you?" asked Maris, with a frightened catch in her voice. "Would it be about the — children — of the mills?" The peculiar tremor of the lip was very noticeable. Alden had seen it come, thus, more than once, when the subject of children had been touched upon. In answering, he kept his eyes averted, for the pain it gave him.

"Chiefly about the children, I presume," he said. "You know what a wave of mawkish sentiment is now sweeping over this land of ours. Of course there are abuses, but —"

"She must not try to stir up trouble there!" interrupted Maris, still more breathlessly. "Oh, I do hope it really isn't that she is coming for. It's too heartrending to talk about. And she'll do no good. All the ladies here in Sidon tell me it's no earthly use to try. Schools have been started, night schools, playgrounds, — all those things you hear about, and the children won't go to them. They actually prefer working in the mills. They are proud of earning the money to help their parents. And with children and parents both against you, how can anything be accomplished? Nobody has a right to come between a mother and her child. I shall do my best to persuade Ruth against it."

Dwight Alden did not answer. He recognized the parrot-like casuistry of the words, and knew, well enough, from what social class the speaker had derived them. Of course the wives and daughters of mill-owners wished no interference with the source of all their luxuries. Child labor was cheap, and mill percentages correspondingly large. But this was no time to enlighten Maris. She had risen to her feet and gone again to a window, where she stood, looking out. The squawk of a motor car came from the street. In the tense stillness of the room the breaking of a burnt-out hickory log, and the snapping of sparks made an absurd commotion. Then, from without, a new and pleasant sound was heard.

"Church bells!" cried Alden, springing up. "By George, I had forgotten that I met the old minister yesterday, and promised him that both of us should

be in the Brattle pew to-day. You don't mind much, do you?"

"Mind! Why, I think it is perfectly lovely for us to go to church. We never used to in New York. You were a darling to have promised!" She came running back to him, her changeable face bright with anticipation. "Let me see, — what had I better wear?" She frowned, put up her hand to her cheek, and was in an instant, deep in meditation. "That new red gown from Paris might seem a little startling in the South," she murmured, chiefly to herself. "I reckon, this first Sunday I'd better be plain and dark." Now she lifted eyes to her husband. "Don't you think I'd better be plain and dark, Dwight?" Her voice thrilled with appeal. One would have thought that upon his answer depended her fate.

Alden stooped to kiss her. "You couldn't be plain and dark if you tried. Whatever you put on, you'll be the prettiest and best-dressed woman in church."

She flushed with pleasure at his words. "Look out or you will make me so vain that there won't be any living with me," she warned him. Then she stood on tiptoe to fling vehement arms about his neck. "Oh, but I do love you to think me pretty, — and I love nice clothes, — and you give me such beautiful ones! You are too good to me!" Now there came a liquid quiver to her words as if she were in the mystery of a thrush's note — "You give me everything, — everything that I have been hungry for all my life."

He held her closely. "You give me even more, my dear one," he said. A little later, — "There, — the first bell is ringing. We mustn't be late. It might vex the Reverend Mr. Singleterry."

He felt the form of Maris stiffen in his arms. She drew back from him, then clutched at his coat again

as if to steady a sudden trembling. "The Reverend, — who — what name did you say, Dwight?"

"Singleterry. An unusual one, isn't it, but somehow it precisely suits the old chap who bears it. He looks like an English dean in a story-book. Why do you stare so, Maris, have you ever? — Why, Maris! how pale you are growing!"

"No, no!" she cried sharply, and wrenched herself apart that she might turn her face. "Don't look at me so hard. It is nothing, — just one of the funny pains I sometimes have!" She tried to smile up at him as she demonstrated the spot by pressing both hands over her heart. "I am all right now. Let me go. As you said, we mustn't be late."

She turned and almost ran from the room, pausing at the doorway for a merry farewell wave of the hand, and a smile meant to be reassuring.

Alden stared after her with eyes in which perplexity slowly darkened to mistrust. Why had the name of Singleterry changed her, at a stroke, into an image of pallid terror? Why, when it was so evident, had she attempted to deny previous knowledge of the name? Perhaps she would have said it was only her pallor that she denied. Dwight's nature was one that abhorred evasions, and this was not the first time that Maris' lips had contradicted all that his judgment and her own expressive face had proclaimed. The vague sense of impending trouble, drifting always in ghostly strata about the big rooms of the Brattle house, rose now to his heart.

With a swift gesture that was vehement without being extravagant, and a muttered anathema against his own womanish fears, he turned back to the fire, reseated himself, took up a recent New York paper as yet unopened, and soon lost himself in more tangible conjectures of the stock-market.

CHAPTER TWO

A FORENOON CALL

SIDON's week of toil came in with the hoarse screaming of mill whistles. Before the first gray paling of the dawn these vocal harpies, escaping from tall chimneys, flew wide and tore the fabric of the night to echoes.

The Regina, mindful of her leadership, possessed, still, the tallest smoke stack, and the loudest shriek of steam. In the Regina's village, held like an arrested avalanche of unpainted huts upon the eastern slope of Red Horse Hill, the first blast of sound brought an answering activity. Out of the darkness flickered feeble dots of candle-flame, then the red glow of quickly lighted fires, and in a few moments came the greasy, choking smell of frying bacon. By the call of the second whistle, thirty minutes later, the entire population, lacking only a handful of infants and fever-stricken adults, was ready to pour itself, like lava, down the reddening slopes into the valley where the great mill, banded in strata of chill morning mist, glared with its countless windows, uttering grunts of steam, and menacing growls of machinery, like some huge beast awakening.

When, finally, the sun had cleared himself a peep-hole in the dawn, he was affronted by black clouds of smoke, soot-laden, and acrid with the gases of soft coal. On the slope of the hill already the village lay bare and untenanted as a forgotten heap of shells.

Beyond the forest-mane to the west, aristocratic Sidon found the day more slowly. The sun was in the spring-tinted forest branches when, in the sleepy town, trim house boys or young negro maids came on to broad verandahs to shake the rugs out and to sweep. Windows in dining-rooms and kitchens went up for airing, and wood-smoke rolled decorously from ornamented chimney tops. Milk-wagons, vegetable and butcher-carts began their rounds, and newsboys hurled at the closed front doors their twisted wares. By nine o'clock breakfasts had been eaten, and the men of the family had taken their leave for business offices in "the city," or out to the more distant mills. By ten o'clock residential Sidon to the west, and industrial Sidon to the east of Red Horse Hill, had each settled to its week-day stride.

Even in a new and mixed community the forenoon of a busy Monday is an unusual hour for a call. The Reverend Mark Singleterry was not ignorant of this fact; to be more definite, he had arranged his visit because of it. He wished to see his new parishioner, Mrs. Dwight Alden of New York, alone, and, as he made his way slowly up the hill, the troubled look on his clean, scholarly old face indicated that his mission was not one accompanied by joyous anticipation.

His rectory and its contiguous church, "St. John's," a new, expensive structure of the sort called, vaguely, "Gothic," were on the fashionable avenue where, farther to the west, stood the Brattle mansion. Between the two locations, along the main street, ran narrow pavements of new cement; but there were lateral thoroughfares of viscid mud which, in spite of carefully chosen footing and more than one stork like leap, had turned the minister's neat black boots to a rusty tan.

The sun shone warm this March morning. The old man felt a moisture at the band of his clerical hat, and took it off, baring his white head to whatever stray breeze might deign to come. He gave a sigh, threw his chin up with a little jerk, and passed his long fingers slowly through the shining silver strands upon his brow. The air felt good to him. The released pressure from the close hat band was a distinct relief. This was almost as good as being in a garden.

Unconsciously his pace diminished. One long, narrow foot followed the other up the cemented slope, and each step left the earth with more reluctance. With that backward gesture of the head, Dr. Singleterry had noted, for the first time, the intense color of the morning sky. "Like a blue gentian of the gods," the old man thought, "and those fleecy white clouds about the horizon are its fringes." He smiled, as he always did at the sight or at the thought of flowers, and, with this leverage from a troubled present, had soon passed into reverie.

It was no longer the hard, new pavements of a modern city that he trod, but the old sidewalks of a village among North Carolina hills, the little town of Orbury. The only curbings there were the intertwined roots of the oaks that lined its one long street, and the clay banks of ditches where ferns and *ageratum* and the blue wild violets thrived undisturbed. Stately old houses set back in the midst of square, colonial gardens, gleamed to the right and to the left of him. Three houses farther on would be an ivy covered church, a church whose very silhouette against the sky was eloquent of quiet worship,—and here, for nearly two-score years he had ministered, knowing his flock and loving it as only a lonely poet soul can love.

A deeper sigh rose to the still air; and the old man

wondered, for the thousandth time, how he had ever consented to leave Orbury, or had believed himself capable of battling with the new problems of the outer world. Perhaps, after all, the personal element had had more to do with it than he was then willing to admit. Certainly the death of his best friend, Daniel Brue, following so closely upon the tragic and unsuccessful quest of his only child, had changed, for him, the face of nature. In a wider sphere of activity he had hoped to drown his lonely grief, as well as to accomplish something of more definite good. In neither hope had he been fortunate. This could not be denied, and here in Sidon things were growing steadily worse for him. As if to climax and to vivify his vague forebodings he had seen yesterday, among his congregation, as one sees through the darkness some phantom of the night, the ashen face and burning eyes of Daniel's child, of Maris Brue.

The blue above him had begun to pale. Dr. Singleterry shook his head slowly, and then, with the air of one who dons a hair cloth shirt, replaced the wide felt hat. Now he looked about him. The Brattle house, its square pretence at once marred and emphasized by the conspicuous porte cochère, stood only a hundred yards away. No need for haste. He would reach it soon enough.

Although he had thought of little else all night, he must attempt to realize once again, and this time very clearly, that the mistress of the great mansion, now known as Mrs. Alden, was Maris Brue. If he could only be sure, before he entered, that she had clear right to use her present name; that she had not again, as once before, grasped at forbidden fruit. "Ah, Maris, my little Maris," he almost groaned, "the old Eve was always very strong in you."

Though his thought and his words condemned,

his kind old eyes had softened. Maris had, from her infancy, been strangely dear to him, and her deliberate severance, after her father's death, of all friendly ties in Orbury, had been one of the keenest sorrows the old minister had ever known.

What an untamable fire-fly of a child she had always been! And yet how generous, how quickly touched to goodness! The old man smiled. He could see her now as clearly as he saw that fallow mill-child passing. Often at the click of her father's gate in Orbury she had run down the long box set path to meet him, her little arms upraised, her eyes shining like the glowworms that, by night, couched among the hedge roots. Or, if there were not time to enter, and he merely slackened pace that he might peer over the low brick wall for her, she would be always somewhere in the tangled garden where she alone, since her young mother's death, had been allowed to walk.

It was a strange and lonely life, perhaps, for a child, just herself, the widowed father, and old Mammy Chloe, with daily visits from Dr. Singleterry. Some of the neighbors, good women who had known Maris' mother and grandmother, — a few of them even her great-grandmother who was an Imboden, — protested in the child's behalf, and forced Daniel Brue to send her, part of the time, at least, to school.

But to the place of learning Maris went or not, just as she willed; read, as she pleased in her father's old-fashioned, classic library; and spent most of her time in the overgrown coverts of the garden, where she had established a fairy kingdom, and where she reigned, a dainty tyrant, Empress of a realm of fantasies.

It became a common saying in the village that

Daniel Brue would live to regret the lawless upbringing of his child. When, at an earlier date than the old dames had reckoned, this prophecy was fulfilled, it is but justice to say that there was no gloating triumph, only a passionate sympathy both with the father, and with the headstrong girl who had brought upon herself the tragedy.

The minister closed his eyes and shivered a little at the recollection. For the last few moments he had been walking briskly, driven by his inward agitation. He paused and stared about him as before, and now a look as of boyish embarrassment spread over his face, and a thin flush mounted. He had walked clear past the Brattle gate. The trivial incident troubled him not a little. It was bad luck to pass a gate and retrace one's steps to it. He glanced wistfully ahead. The thought flashed to his mind that he would keep directly on along the avenue, turn, at the next crossing, to the right, and, making his way around the block come out at a street now some yards behind him, to the east, so that he could again approach the Brattle house from an orthodox direction. But, in an instant, the impulse was dismissed. It was too childish. Besides Maris might have been watching and would surely laugh at him. It was one of Dr. Singleterry's deep seated weaknesses, — the horror of being laughed at.

With a heart several ounces heavier than it had been a moment earlier, he turned about, came to the low iron gate, opened it with a vigorous "click," and walked swiftly up the cemented walk.

Archer answered to his ring.

"Yassir. M'is Alden's in. She's settin' in the drawin'-room. This way, Sir."

At the threshold Dr. Singleterry paused, and looked down ruefully at his muddy boots. He longed to

go back and scrape them, but Archer stood by in an attitude of rigid attention, and the visitor forbore.

"Shall I take your hat, Sir?"

"No," said the minister, and grasped the just mentioned article as if it were a talisman. "I prefer to retain it."

Archer looked politely surprised, and turned away.

Dr. Singleterry took a few hesitating steps into the room. Blinded by the clear sunlight through which he had come he saw now, as in a blur, the indistinct grouping of furniture, the gleam of polished floors, and the iridescent light that filtered in through curtains of many-colored tissue. A low, silken rush of women's garments told him that from some indistinguishable nook his hostess had risen and was hurrying toward him.

With both hands he grasped tightly the rim of his hat, holding it upright before his single row of clerical coat buttons. He was not sure he wished to take the hands this rustling lady would hold out to him. She must have understood the gesture, for she paused suddenly, and then said in a conventional voice, "Dr. Singleterry, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Let us come this way, — nearer the fire," said Maris, preceding him down the long room.

From the dim beauty of the space his eye secured, in passing, but a single clear detail, a glass bowl of daffodils on a table which, as in a stream, reflected their image in the rich mahogany.

The friendly fire beckoned as if in welcome. Mrs. Alden motioned her visitor to a chair, the one, where, on the previous morning, Dwight Alden had lounged at ease. But the old man, with an imperceptible shake of the head, refused it, selecting for himself an upright chair, on the front edge of which he sat, his

back bone rigid, his hat still held vertically against his chest.

Maris threw herself into an arm chair opposite, and plunged recklessly into the perilous theme, "You recognized me yesterday!"

"Yes, on the instant."

"I had hoped, — that is," she corrected, "I had believed myself greatly changed."

The other looked gravely upon her. "Yours is a face too changeable ever really to change," he said, and the epigram was, in a certain sense, a help to him. "Besides, my memory for faces is as good as my memory for names is bad."

She did not answer this, but sat still, gazing into the fire. Her motionless attitude had as little of repose in it as would an arrested flame.

Dr. Singleterry waited nervously. He cleared his throat slightly, and then coughed, wondering what next to say. Being a man he had few arts for concealing his uneasiness. At length the tension grew too fine. Something must be done.

"I fear, Maris, that you underestimated the love and sympathy of your friends at Orbury," he said. "The long waiting for tidings was hard for some of us."

"I knew it was," answered Maris, with a hint of sullenness. "Sometimes I had to lie awake at night worrying over it. I could just hear the kind of things you all were saying, especially old Mrs. Weldon;" here her face hardened. "But, most of the time, I didn't care. I was too miserable to care, either for myself or others. You heard, at least, that I had failed?"

He nodded sadly. "Yes, at the last news, you had still been unable to trace that evil-doer, Martin, and —"

She broke in with a gesture showing that she could not bear the forthcoming words. "Yes, I failed. He — he and his companions — seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. There was some rumor of a train-wreck, and his name was published among the injured, but I felt at the time, and my lawyers felt, that he had caused this to be printed merely to trick me. It was not until three years later that he died."

Dr. Singleterry gave an eager start. His whole aspect changed. His eyes brightened. "Then he is dead! You were certain of his death before your second marriage!"

Maris drew herself upright, and, for an instant, stared incredulously. "You don't mean to say that you have been thinking anything else," she challenged. Then her lips shook. "So that was what your face was saying to me from the pulpit, yesterday."

Her eyes began to blaze. The old man shrank back, in consternation. Suddenly Maris, too, began to cower. She crouched down in her cushioned seat, and put both hands up before her face.

"Oh, oh," he heard her moan. "It is things like this they think of me at home?"

"My dear girl," cried the minister, now all contrition. "Do not mistake my meaning. At the worst I thought perhaps you might have taken advantage of the laws of man which would quickly have given you release from such a miscreant. But you know that I hold little by such laws, and I would not like to think of my little Maris —" He broke off, and leaned to pat her shoulder gently. "Don't cry, Maris. I am deeply troubled that I have hurt you, but this doubt has been tormenting me ever since I saw you yesterday, by the side of the strong, noble looking man who is now your husband."

I am thankful that you have found happiness, my child."

Maris took down her hands and tried to smile at him. "After all, it is my own fault. I should have let my friends in Orbury know when the news of Martin's death first reached me, — but much was happening in my life, just then. I should have sent them notice, too, of my marriage to Mr. Alden. But you were away from Orbury, and I did not know your address. With you and my father both gone —" Her voice trembled.

"Yes, yes, my dear," he said sympathetically, "I can realize now how it all seemed to you. Don't tell me more if it troubles you."

"I want to speak, now I have begun," said Maris. "It softens something in me, though I feel an unreality, as if we were both speaking of a dead woman. It was so long, — so long ago! The degradation, the hideous shame of what I endured in Orbury! Can you wonder that I shrank from going back?"

"But the fault was not with you, poor child."

"I had brought it on myself, after advice from all who loved me. It broke my father's heart when I married Martin. I was infatuated, I suppose. It seemed to me a generous thing to do, to lift him to our higher level, — to bring out all that I thought fine and good in him! You know how he repaid that trust!"

For an instant she grew so white that the minister thought she must swoon. "There now, there now," he soothed. "Let us say no more of it."

"I cannot stop now," she said, between clenched teeth. "I must go on. You all knew that my married life with him was as wretched as you had foreseen. But I was bearing it for the baby's sake. I kept my agony to myself so that I do not think

even my father suspected all that Martin put upon me. I would have continued to endure, but my very silence seemed to make Felicia's father hate me. No one, — no one on earth knows what I suffered. I wonder now that I could have hidden it. And when he saw he could vent his hate for me no other way, — he left me, — for a servant, — and took my child!"

She was quivering now from head to foot. The old man found no words, only looked at her with loving, suffering eyes.

"Do you wonder," she burst out again, with intense bitterness, "that I was ashamed to show my face again in Orbury?"

"No shame can degrade so long as it is nobly borne," said the old man. "Let us think no more of the sinner, Martin. God has removed him from your path. Tell me, instead, of what befell you after you had given up your efforts in the West."

His quiet tones soothed and steadied her. In answer to his request, she folded her hands in her lap as one who tells an impersonal narrative, and said, evenly:

"I stayed on in Kansas City where the lawyers are until I had spent everything, even the little patrimony that you forwarded to me after my father's death. The lawyers needed it for detectives, and personal expenses, and a lot of other things that I forget."

"I have heard that lawyers are insatiable," said the old man, naively.

"When the money was gone," she continued, in the same matter-of-fact tone, "of course I had to think how I could earn more."

"You should have known that you had, always, a home with me," said the minister.

"I did know that, dear Dr. Singleterry," said

Maris, and put her hand out to clasp, for an instant, one of his. "But there was no peace like that for me. I had to go to work out there in the big world, and gain what I could so that the lawyers could continue searching. As you may know, I had no rest by night or day. As for that," she added, her voice sinking, and her face changing to a deep sadness, "though my present marriage has brought me happiness, I have not yet gained peace."

"And how did a will-o'-the-wisp like you earn money in the great world?"

She turned a sad little fleeting smile to him. "Oh, I know I was naughty about my schooling, but I could always learn when I wanted to. I took up stenography, and did well at it. For a little while I was in the office of my lawyers at Kansas City. Then one was rather — rather — familiar, and I left them. I think the junior partner never quite forgave me for the rebuff. And then, by a great piece of good fortune, too long to explain now, I finally got a position in New York, in the office of a well-known firm, Brattle, King and Alden."

"Alden," repeated the old man thoughtfully, and for some reason Maris went suddenly crimson.

"I had been ill once in Kansas City," she hurried on. "I don't know whether you ever heard. It was some form of nervous trouble with a new name. About three years ago, in New York, I broke down in the same way. They thought I could not get well. The firm was most kind to me, insisted upon sending me to an expensive hospital, and all that. While in the hospital," she paused unexpectedly, and the sudden silence had the effect of a gasp, "during my convalescence, Mr. Alden asked me to be his wife. We were married in the hospital chapel."

She leaned back, glad that her narrative was done.

All at once she had become weary, almost faint, and a breath of the old sickness stole to her through the years.

Dr. Singleterry had remained upright, his face thoughtful.

"How long before your second marriage had you known of James Martin's death?"

Again the red tide swept over Maris' cheeks and throat. "Not very long, I must admit. In fact, it was that news, brought me at the very height of my illness, that made it possible for me to get well."

Dr. Singleterry made a vague sound in his throat. A small chill, as of fear, ran through Maris. What did he mean by that grave face? And what was he to ask her next?

"Was it merely a rumor of Martin's death, Maris, or did you receive clear proofs?"

"Why, written proofs, of course. I would not have risked anything without them. I had written to my lawyers just on the eve of my break-down, saying that I could not send any more money, perhaps for months, and begging them to trust me for awhile, — not to give up the search."

The old man was silent for a few moments. Then he said, slowly, "I think it would have been better had you given up that firm of lawyers, particularly after what you term the rebuff to one of them."

"My instinct was that way, too," answered Maris. "But I reasoned it out like this. They had been in touch with the wretched affair from the very first, and were at that time on a new and promising clue. If I took the case from them they would be angry, and almost certainly refuse to tell another lawyer what had been done. I had committed myself to them, as the saying is."

"Yes, that is a good argument," admitted the other.

"Besides," Maris went on, her voice sinking, "I did not want to tell any more people than necessary." Her look of humiliation smote her companion.

"Well, well!" he cried, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "it has turned out well enough, it seems. They have accomplished the search, and sent you proofs. Was your husband, Mr. Alden, quite satisfied with the proofs?"

This question Maris did not seem to hear. Her face was growing more distressed. She had begun to twist and to untwist the fingers of both hands, one into the other. Now she sat forward on the very edge of her chair as if, in another instant, she must spring to her feet. When she spoke her voice thrilled with a deeper note.

"You seem to forget," she breathed, "that neither Martin's life or his death was what most concerned me. He was not my quest. It was Felicia, — my little girl, Felicia." The name broke from her in a stifled sob. She sprang up, and began to pace to and fro, always silently wringing her slender hands. The old man shivered under the intensity of her words.

"And have your lawyers never found a clue of her, or of the nurse-girl, Jane?" he managed to ask. She paused in her walk to answer.

"Nothing of Jane, — we scarcely thought of her. But Felicia, —" here she caught herself into silence, and bit her lip hard that she might go on speaking, "In that Potter's Field where the certificates tell me the body of James Martin lies, there is, — quite near him, — another grave, — a little, little grave —"

Dr. Singleterry let his head fall forward to his hand. He could not bear the look in Maris' upturned face. "Yes, — yes," he choked out, at last.

"The lawyers want me to believe that she lies

there. No actual record of the little grave is to be found, but they think it probable —” Suddenly she stopped, wheeled about, and came up to him, her small alert figure shaking from head to foot, her fists clenched, her eyes burning with the passion of her baffled motherhood.

“It is the thought of her, — my baby, my little baby, — that is never absent from me. I cannot believe that she is dead. I know she is not! For I have crept out in the darkness and lain down on the friendly earth, — close — close, — with my cheek against it; — and if that little form, that fibre of my living flesh and soul, were hidden under the soil, something would let me know it, — something subtler and more wonderful than all the fluids which science now is finding. I have called to my baby under earth’s grassy covering, and she does not answer. She is alive, somewhere, — somewhere, — wandering lost, perhaps. Oh, I am married to a good man who loves me, — I have all that I need and more, — and more, — but I can never see a child, — a rich child or a poor one, — but I must ask myself, ‘Is she, — my baby, — happy and cared for, like this child; or is she wretched and unhappy, — perhaps ill-used?’ If she is still with that woman who helped to steal her, there is no depth so low that she may not be hidden there. I fear the sight of children! I tremble at the thought of them. Sometimes I think I cannot bear it any longer. One should not bear such horror and stay alive!” Her words were coming in disjointed fragments, each phrase a cry of agony.

The old man was voiceless. He too was shaking with her passion.

There was a long silence broken only by her struggles for composure. After a while she could speak more naturally.

"Do you know," she said, "that sometimes it seems to me the chief horror, — the most hideous mockery of the whole situation, that I should have named my child 'Felicia!' How did I dare? James Martin was her father. I had begun to know that the future held nothing but misery for us both."

"Let us try to think of the blessings that still are yours, my child," said the old man, zealous to comfort her. "You have a noble husband."

"Yes," she broke in almost rudely, "I have that priceless blessing, — I do not undervalue it. Sometimes the woman part of me is happy, — deliriously happy! I love my husband with an almost desperate love, as we cling to a treasure that may be taken from us. But the indivisible part of me, — the mother part! — there are the vultures tearing always on a self-renewing sore!"

The old man roused himself. "Your sorrow is deep, I know," he said. "But you could bear it in a higher way. You speak like a tortured pagan, rather than a child of God."

He spoke perhaps more sternly than he knew, holding himself stiffly in his stiff backed chair. The pallor of his face showed the strain through which he had been passing.

Maris stared, not comprehending on the instant; then her quick sympathy rushed to his defence. She hurried up to him, kneeling by his side. "Forgive me, dear Dr. Singleterry. I will not rave like that any more. But it is the first time that I have been able to speak freely for seven years. Just think of that, — seven long years. It has done me good, although I suffered as I told it. Now you must help me put it behind me for another seven years, — perhaps for ever. I want you to talk to me of Orbury,

— to tell me all that you have done since I saw you last.”

She rose and drew her arm-chair forward, and sat down quietly. She had the outward appearance of completely restored serenity.

The visitor made no pretence of hiding his relief. After a long life of service, he had begun to find, at times, a sudden drain of sympathy strangely exhausting. He put his hand, now, to his heart, but his face was clearing, and when he began to speak, Maris closed her eyes that she might feel herself, again, a child in Orbury.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEVIL'S QUADRILLE

It is strange how quickly a room takes on the mood of its human occupants.

The very fire on Maris' hearth which, for the last half hour had crackled, choked and sent up small acrid gusts of sooty flame, now drew itself together into a compact mass of cheerful embers. Instead of the flickering light and shade, to intensify the varying expressions of suffering and excitement on both faces, a steady crimson glow threw upon them serenity and a sort of fictitious youthfulness.

The first words came from Maris and were spoken dreamily. "I can just see yonder, over the churchyard wall, the pointed red gables of your rectory." She sighed, half in regret, half in the luxury of a pleasant recollection, and the old man unconsciously repeated the reflective sound.

"Those were our golden days, my child. And do you," he went on, "by any chance remember that long row of French artichokes that used to grow against my side of the wall?"

"Indeed I do, as if I walked along them now. The leaves were of silver tapestry."

He laughed a low laugh of pleasure. "And when the sun's meridian heat wilted their splendor, I used to think of them as silver lace upon an altar-cloth. And then the row of savory herbs, — my thyme and

lavender, with coriander and the old fashioned bitter-sweet. I've never yet seen gilly-flowers that would have dared measure their height with mine. The mignonette, too, became quite famous in the village, so that when one walked along the streets bearing a spray of special beauty the passer by would think, if indeed he did not speak openly the thought, 'Some one has been to Dr. Singleterry's garden.' "

He sat brooding, the trouble all vanished from his face. Upon it shone the soft radiance of tender reminiscence. Maris leaned forward in her chair to watch him. Affection was in her eyes, and yet a little wonder, too. Was this what it meant to be old, — that present stress could slip from the shoulders like a velvet pall, and one sit dreaming in the midst of it, — dreaming of a vanished garden?

He came back with a little start. "The rectory they have given me here in Sidon is a much more expensive building, — an abomination of pretence! But not a garden, front or back. No spot to dig or to think in but a wee mouldy patch of earth the size of this hearth rug, under my study window. But already I have planted pinks in it and they are growing. You remember that I had pinks under my study windows at Orbury, too? "

Maris smiled and nodded. He went on eagerly.

"No such inspiration for a sermon, Maris, as that which swings in the censer of a small clove pink. I can almost smell them now! "

"I do smell them," asserted Maris recklessly, and sniffed the air. "Oh, what years and years it has been since I have seen them growing, tumbling always over the brick edges of the bed, and trying to run away."

"Well, well," chuckled the old man in delight, "before long you shall see a whole procession, carry-

ing the banners of their heavenly faith. My buds are swelling fast."

"I am going to have some flowers after a while in this bare garden," said Maris, glancing out toward the unfinished space. "Until now I have been busy every minute trying to make the enormous, cold house feel like a home to live in."

The minister looked at her with his gentle smile. "I know well the difficulty of the task. It has been mine for nearly a year." As he spoke, the old troubled look came back to him. "Alas, my dear, if it was a mistake for me to give up Orbury, it was nothing less than a calamity when I allowed myself to be persuaded to accept the call to Sidon. All that I had hoped to accomplish here was made impossible for me even before I had arrived."

"Why, what was it that you had hoped to do in Sidon?" she asked quickly.

He was surprised by the new alertness of her tone, and faced about more directly as he answered, "Why, mission work among the mill people, of course. There is crying need of it."

Her look of shrinking almost trenched upon aversion. "Oh, you wanted to take up that question," she breathed. "And you have not done so, — not at all?"

"I have not," said the old man somewhat curtly. "On arrival it was intimated to me, — to be more accurate, — it was laid before me as an ultimatum, that I was not to touch, in my sermons, upon problems of capital and labor, nor concern myself, too deeply, with the conditions of mill villages. I regret to say that your husband's predecessor, Mr. Brattle, was one who expressed his views most strongly."

Was it imagination, or had the tension of Maris'

face relaxed, and did she strive to hide a look of deep relief?

Always intuitive, she felt the dawning of this doubt in him, and, speaking quickly, said, "Perhaps they believed that you couldn't understand about such things all at once. That is the way my husband thinks of it. He says that no one ought to give opinions without having lived here for a long time, and having had a chance to see both sides of the case."

"I am surprised at such words from you, Maris," said Dr. Singleterry. "There are no 'sides' as you call it to want, and misery and sin. I have refrained, heretofore, from preaching on forbidden topics, just for the reasons that your husband urges; as for the other embargo, — no smooth, smiling mill-owner, — no, and no church-full of mill-owners, can keep me from visiting God's poor! I go among the villagers as I choose," his voice now rang with energy and indignation. "A few of them make an attempt at cleanliness and decency, — but with others, — and the Regina village among these latter, — if ever there was a hideous ulcer sore in the side of humanity, it is just such a spot as that! I know what I am talking of —"

Maris interrupted by a low cry, and flung an imploring hand out toward him. "Don't tell me. I cannot bear it. You will begin to speak next of the little children. That is what I cannot endure! Nothing can help them —"

It was the minister's time to interrupt. "Nothing can be done to help so long as personal cowardice keeps sympathy away from them, and cannot bear to hear even the true story of their wrongs!"

"It is not with me as with other women," moaned Maris. "You know it is not. In every wretched

mill-child I see Felicia, — the suffering of those children is her suffering."

"For her sake you should spend your life trying to lighten theirs."

Maris kept for an instant longer her cowering attitude; then she sat upright, a challenge on her lips, "You call me cowardly. I have a reason, — a terrible reason for my cowardice. You have no reason, and yet you have admitted that you do not preach against their wrongs."

The old man's eyes took fire. "I said," he corrected, "that heretofore I have been dumb, not from a servile fear of the wealthy evil doers of my congregation, but that I might be certain of my facts. Do you dream I have been inactive all these months? No, I have studied, investigated, thought, and prayed. The time is near for me to speak. Keep silence! — I?"

His eyes had darkened and then filled, again, with light. He raised his hand to push back, impatiently, the white locks on his forehead. The wide felt hat, for once forgotten, lay on the floor. His face was stern, yet transfigured and illuminated with an inner glory. So, Maris thought, might have looked the angel at the gate of Paradise. "Some day I shall speak, and when I do, my congregation will listen." Suddenly he stood up, made a wide, dramatic gesture, and repeated, "And when I do, my congregation, — it will listen!"

Maris felt faint. A chill, prophetic wind blew on her lids. It was not her place to argue or oppose. She, too, got to her feet, grasping the edge of the mantel for support.

The old man leaned toward her, his stern look melting into a smile. "Don't be so frightened, child. It is all to come about just as God wills; even, in his

good time, to tidings of the small, lost lamb, Felicia. And while I think of it, there is just one more point I wish to ask, concerning her. May I speak it? "

Maris could only bow in assent.

The old man drew her fingers from the mantel shelf, and held them closely as he questioned, " Does your good husband, Mr. Alden, feel with you, that the little one still lives? "

The small hand within his own slowly turned to ice. The white, frozen look grew on her face and spread even to her staring eyes. She did not try to speak.

" Maris! " he cried in fear. " Don't look so strangely. What have I done? Was it wrong to ask you? "

" No, — not wrong, " her stiffened lips got out.

" What is it, then? "

" My husband — does not — know — of Felicia. " It was a soulless automaton that spoke the words.

A sort of slow horror grew in the eyes that watched her.

" Your former marriage, — what does he know of that? "

" Nothing. "

" You worked in his office and, later, married him under your maiden name of Maris Brue? "

" Yes, — Maris Brue. "

The minister's fine face grew sharp. An expression of contempt dawned on his lips as he said, coldly, " I begin to understand why you wished no intercourse with Orbury. " Then, as she did not answer, he changed suddenly, flung her small hand away from him, and cried aloud, in bitterness, " O Maris, — Maris, — will you forever wreck the best in you, — poor blind, unthinking, reckless child! Can you not see that for the sake of prudence, if for no higher

reason, you should have told Mr. Alden everything, — everything! ”

“ I can see, at least, how it appears to you,” the automaton assured him. “ But of course you can have no idea of the steps that led up to it; or the peculiar situation I was in just at the moment. When I first went to New York I had decided not to use James Martin’s name. I still think it was best. As to Mr. Alden’s love, — ” Here her voice became, again, that of a suffering human creature, so that she had to pause and steady it. “ It came upon me as a great, a wonderful surprise.”

The listener’s face did not relax its sternness. “ You mean me to believe, knowing you as well as I do, that you were unconscious of this man’s interest until he spoke? ”

Maris flushed under the taunt. “ Not exactly that. I had been conscious of his kindly interest, but until he spoke I had not believed that he would ask me to be his wife.”

The minister pondered these words thoughtfully; upon which Maris, as if to change the course of his reflections, went on more lightly.

“ There was another man at the time, too; a young doctor, house-physician at the hospital where I was ill. I knew from the first moment that he had begun to care for me; and when the news of Martin’s death came, I was so weary with the struggle of it all, so sick in mind and body, and so relieved that I was free, I had almost decided to marry the boy doctor when he should ask me. You see,” she supplemented, after a moment of uncomfortable silence, “ all my shallowness is spread out before you.”

“ Then, in the hospital, Mr. Alden addressed you? ”

Maris’ lips twitched at the old-fashioned phrase. She drooped her lids to hide the shining of her eyes,

and answered, "Yes, — and, just at such a time, it was as if the Sun god stooped to pick up a trampled weed. I had admired him more than any man I had ever met. Because I had thought Martin still alive, I had tried to fight back more personal thoughts. But when he said he loved me," here she turned away, drawing a long, tremulous breath, "I knew well how it had been with me all along. The future opened before me like a new paradise. I could not, — oh, I could not risk losing so very much by speaking of a past in which I had, after all, done no wrong."

The minister shook his head. "You did actual and definite wrong at that moment by deceiving a man who loved and trusted you. A falsehood of this kind bears a winged seed. Your day of reckoning must come, Maris."

Her face, so tenderly bright an instant earlier, clouded now with a sullen frown. "I suppose it will," she said. "But until it does come I shall go on as I am going."

He sighed, baffled by her dull obstinacy. "You say that you love your husband, and he cares tenderly for you?"

"What of it?" asked the woman.

"Is his love, then, not strong enough to bear the test of your disclosures?"

"He might possibly have overlooked it before our marriage, though he is a proud man, and narrow in certain lines. I do not think he would ever forgive me now. He hates treachery above all things. He ought not to forgive me."

"Yet you go on living, knowing each day to be a separate treachery."

"Yes, — and hoarding each day separately, as a miser hoards a golden coin. Sometimes, at night, when he is sleeping I lie still and whisper to myself,

‘I have had one more day of love. Nothing — nothing — can take from me what I have already had!’”

“Unhappy and self-deluded woman!” he cried.

“You have no right even to one golden day. Each is a stolen coin, and each will claim its punishment.”

“Let it come,” she said. “I shall not hasten it, you may be sure.”

“Maris, my poor child, my poor, wilful child, for your own soul’s sake, go to your husband now, — this hour, — making a full confession. Let me go with you, — or speak to him in your behalf.”

“No, — no, — don’t you *dare!*” she cried out as if in terror. Then more soberly, “You must not go to him. You have done your duty in advising me, — but cowardice, — or madness, — perhaps both, — make me deaf to your words. No, Dr. Singleterry, I must, as the Scotch say, dree my own weird. I’ll hold to this one happiness until fate comes and takes it from me. Oh, I know that retribution is on the way. Sometimes I am a Daphne in her imprisoning tree, and I feel the stiff bark spreading upward over my heart and lips.”

“Well, let me leave you,” said the minister, “I can do no more for your rebellious spirit. Think over what I have said, and perhaps, with God’s grace, you may be softened.”

He stooped for his fallen hat, and without further attempt at farewell, turned and walked toward the door, Maris following him. “Do you feel,” she began timidly, “that I am such a wicked woman you don’t want me to come to your church any more?”

He turned back to her with a smile so full of sadness, yet of pity, that her eyes filled. “Poor little Maris,” he said. “You are not so wicked, as only very blind and foolish. Come to me freely. I shall always count it a privilege to be sought by you, and will advise

you to the very best of my experience. God be with you, my poor child."

She grasped the hand held out to her. "Oh, I am glad that you are here. I feel safer, somehow. Perhaps with you to help me—" The last words died on her lips. He saw her eyes stare past him toward the street, distend, and then shrink as if from a terrible vision. They stood directly within the entrance door. Her hands fell from his and she cowered back, pointing, and asking, in a hoarse undertone,—"Those children,—Oh, can they be really children? They are stopping."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Why, that's only a handful of the mill children," he said. "Have you seen none before? They have stopped to admire the house."

"Let them look," she panted. "But I cannot stop to see them. Those are not children,—they are little ghosts of children already dead. I did not know that in the world there were such children. I must go." She vanished into the shadow of the hall, and he heard the sound of frantic feet running up the stairway. Then a chamber door was shut with such violence that the house reverberated. Afterward a great silence came.

The little girls, fifteen or more in number, had stopped to gaze in, open-mouthed, at the lady who was acting so strangely. As she vanished, all the faded eyes were fixed on Dr. Singleterry, now moving slowly down the cemented path toward them. At first it seemed that they would scatter, like a group of frightened animals, but, reassured by the gentleness of his face and manner, they stood still, watching his approach.

All were small and thin. The head of one girl rose a few inches above the rest, and it could be seen

that she was the dominant spirit of the little flock. All were attired in scanty garments (the waist and skirt being sewed together) of faded blue denim, or unbleached cotton stuff, and many were barefoot in the chill March wind. Those wearing shoes had on, apparently, mismated pairs from cast-off wardrobes of their elders, and stockings so full of holes that they seemed covered with pale yellow polka-dots. In spite of apparent fragility the children all had a certain air of alertness, a vivacity and jerkiness as of marionettes. Their eyes were never still. The glances ran ceaselessly from point to point of the house, then to the advancing Dr. Singleterry, then back to the house again. The mouths of all were discolored with snuff, and many had snuff-sticks of blue-gum wood between their teeth.

The minister tried to smile at them as he would at other children. He was casting about in his mind for something to say when the tallest girl, lifting a hand on which two fingers were missing, pointed toward the house as best she could, and demanded, "Say, Mister! Is dat de house of de Reginy mill boss?"

"Yes, that is now the home of Mr. Alden of New York. It was built by Mr. Brattle, who died. Do you think it a handsome house?"

Minnie paused. It was not well to encourage these oppressors, these aristocrats, with too much praise. "Hit'll do all right, I reckon," she said, with impudent assurance. This reply threw her companions into fits of merriment, or rather, into the travesty of mirth. They turned away their faces, half shielding them with scrawny hands, giggled, shrugged shoulders high, and exchanged glances of delight at Minnie's wit and daring. The minister's embarrassment gave fuel to their enjoyment.

The only one who did not laugh was a very little girl whose hair was dark, even under its covering of cotton lint, and whose large, solemn eyes had never left the marble portico and cut glass doorways of the house.

"I think it's er *es-quis-ite* house, I do," she declared. "Hit looks like heavun to me!"

Dr. Singleterry, marking her for the first time, stepped a little eagerly in that direction, his face brightening. But here the valiant leader interposed. Heartened by victory she ventured a more dizzy flight. "Listen at dat kid!" she cried, tossing her head in scorn. "Talkin' erbout heavun. Dey *ain't* no heaven. Hit's all lies, made up so's you'll wanten git thar, an' put money in de church-plate ter do it. Dey don't git none er *my* money!"

As she spoke she had taken care, for all her doughtiness, to move backward out of the reach of Dr. Singleterry's arm. Now at a safe distance she paused, and glanced defiantly upward. The old man felt no anger, only a sense of hopelessness so profound that it seemed to enclose him in a night which others could not see. His kind face was emptied of all expressions but that of pain. He stood, staring at the group of children, wondering whether, as Maris had wondered, they could be real children, or mere phantasmagoria that mocked at youth and joy. They did not have the look of human beings, rather of pale, sunless elves from an under-world, — small, elemental beings who had not yet reached the plane of human incarnation.

The arguments of his vestrymen came whispering back to him. What was the use of trying to lift a weight of ignorance like this? One would merely bruise his own heart to death, and from its essence have not caught one permanent drop of good. The

mill in which these children worked was but one of countless hundreds. When it was not the whirling looms and shrieking spool-frames that claimed them, there were forms of bondage equally severe. Glass factories, canneries, coal mines, — busied in North, and South, East and West, — all servile to abuse, — each in its own way a destroyer of the better part of life, which is one's childhood.

Minnie, the leader, after a moment more of poised defiance, and evidently chagrined that her flint had found no steel, gathered her followers by a peremptory sweep of the eyes, and gave a curt signal for departure. But the old man checked her, feeling that he must say something to establish ordinary human intercourse, "How is it that you little girls are out of the mill on a Monday forenoon?" he asked.

"Boiler's busted, God be praised," responded Minnie, briefly. She paused, and gave a sort of elfin grin. Something in the rhythm of the words attracted her. "Boiler's busted, God be praised," she repeated, on a higher key. As she spoke the words, she took a little, dancing, sidewise step. She threw back her head and laughed discordantly. "Ef it warn't fer de good ole boiler we'd be dancin' now, you bet, — dancin' de Devil's Quadrille. Come on, kids! De ole gent never danced dat dance. Let's show him a figger uv de Devil's Quadrille!"

With a dramatic force as strong as it was repellent, Minnie threw herself into the part of a "spooler," her eyes shifting incessantly from part to part of the long, imaginary "side" where the reels revolve, her thin legs leaping from right to left, now an inch backward, now an inch forward, as she leaned over the frame, the claw of her upraised hand ready for its predatory downward swoop on the first broken skein.

The other children, following with marvellous quickness, ranged themselves back to back, facing two long, imaginary "sides," set in a space too narrow. "Bur-r-uh! Wheeze-eeze-eeze!" began Minnie, in imitation of the buzz of wheels, the multitudinous whine of myriad twisting strands. "You start up de clatterin' down dare, Bessie Peters,—you an' Beck Jones," commanded she. Delighted to obey, they raised shrill voices. Now all were at the new, exciting game. The noise grew louder, the twitching motions of the dancers more exaggerated. At the far end the littlest girl danced like a loosened nerve of energy, her dark eyes bright with the fun.

The minister stood as one paralyzed. Slow tears stole out unheeded to find the silver furrows of his face.

A sudden terror flashed upon him. What if Maris, already excited and unnerved by their interview, were gazing upon this terrible scene. He wheeled toward the house. At the window of an upper room he saw a face which seemed the face of a corpse, pressed close against the pane.

At his low cry the children looked, following his upward gaze. A panic seized them. Screaming, they broke into groups, racing down the hill.

For a moment longer the minister stood. From the window the dead face had vanished. The children having reached the bottom of the hill, paused to send back to him gestures of mockery, and a thin, high chorus of uncanny laughter.

"Father in heaven," he whispered as well as he could for shaking lips, "have mercy on all Thy children."

CHAPTER FOUR

RUTH ARRIVES

By the end of the week the enchanting glimpse of Spring vouchsafed by March upon her natal day was blotted out by mists and fine, dispiriting rains. The alleys and narrow lateral streets of Sidon were changed into canals of crimson mud, and work, just begun, upon the Alden garden came to a standstill. More than once Maris threatened to telegraph her sister-in-law not to start south while the hideous weather lasted, but Mr. Alden merely laughed, reminding her that Ruth was an incipient "new woman," impregnable to external conditions.

The truth of his statement was soon verified. Ruth arrived on the appointed day, Friday, — as cheerful, neat and undisturbed as if the sodden skies were raining light. The well-fitting, gray cravenette cloak she wore, and the small gray hat with a white wing at the side, might indeed have been selected as an artistic accompaniment to the gray day which everywhere spread wide over a red-brown earth. Out of the low-toned setting the girl's face gleamed like a flower, so that to Maris' quick imagination it brought the image of a mayflower in its loosening sheath.

Maris had not driven to the station, the one closed coupé being no more than sufficient for Dwight and Ruth, and what hand luggage the latter might have brought; but for ten minutes before the arrival she had been hovering about the porte-cochère, ready to give welcome. With a little cry of pleasure

she now rushed to the carriage door, tugging at it with both hands and crying, "So here you really are! And how dare you look so pretty on a day like this?"

Ruth smiled politely. A single touch of her firm, gloved hand had released the door. Maris was ready with outstretched arms, but the other, swerving ever so slightly to one side, remarked, "You've absolutely ruined your gown upon the carriage wheel."

Maris looked down, then held the folds up ruefully. There was a huge red scar, the shape of a rainbow, running from hip to ankle. "My prettiest and newest tea-gown! I had just put it on for you, Ruth!"

She stood still, gazing at the tragedy. Ruth had run lightly up the few marble steps to the portico, and now her brother, getting from the carriage, took Maris' arm. "Never mind the dress," he said. "Let us get into the house where it is warm. Ugh! This dampness chills one's marrow!"

"Here comes Archer. You take Ruth in, I'll follow. I want to see that he gets all the bags out of the carriage." After an instant of hesitation Alden obeyed. He did not offer to take Ruth's arm. A decorous brother-and-sister kiss had been exchanged at the station, which would suffice them both until a parting came. Ruth walked beside his tall form, casting quick, intelligent glances at the house. Now it was the four great monoliths which she surveyed, now the proportions and the setting of the door.

"Well, what is your dictum?" asked Dwight, much amused by her impersonal interest.

"Pseudo-classic of an extreme kind, and that cut glass front door a barbarity," she said in clear, decisive tones as though addressing a class. "On the other hand the monoliths are almost good. I am

glad they omitted the volutes. It is always more chaste for a private residence."

They turned in at the obnoxious entrance. Maris was close behind them. Again Ruth paused, the group of necessity pausing with her. "Ah, a marble finish to the hallway," said the visitor. "Granite or onyx would have been far better. For interior decoration that milky tone of marble simply cannot be digested, Dwight."

Dwight happened to catch his wife's eyes just then, and at their look of utter bewilderment, laughed aloud. "Neither, I should infer, are your present remarks being digested."

Maris' cheeks burned. She felt hot and shamed that she could not understand. Alden was crossing the hall when his sister's voice checked him. "Dwight, a moment. If Maris has no objection, I will go at once to my room."

"Of course," cried Maris, instantly. "Don't you see, Dwight, that she has on rubbers and rain-coat? I'll show you the way, Ruth. Follow me."

The light was coming back to her eyes. Here, at least, they were on common ground, and she was the one to lead. As she ran up the marble stairs she kept looking backward, with little smiles and nods of welcome. She was thinking of the flowers, of the dainty bits of lace, ribbon and other ornament with which she had decked Ruth's chamber. Nearly at the top she leaned over to call down to her husband, "Don't you come up, Dwight. I want to show it to Ruth all by myself."

At the door she paused for Ruth to join her. Then, quite dramatically, she flung the white panel wide.

Ruth walked in casually. Her face did not change, and she made no remark, though, as it seemed to Maris, her quick, intelligent eyes saw everything at

once. Now she was looking, more minutely, over the tops of tables, at the bedecked dresser, and along the mantel-shelf. Maris clasped her hands in excitement. Surely the girl must like the dainty embroideries of her bureau scarf over the pale blue silk, — the pretty pin-cushions, the pillows in the window-seat, the great square cover on the bed! In the very centre of the room, on a small glass table, stood a blue jardinière of growing hyacinths. Maris had taken the greatest pains to secure these hyacinths, knowing them to be the flowers that Northerners frequently send each other.

Ruth's eyes had been everywhere. Now they came back to their hostess, still unsatisfied. "Have no letters been forwarded?" she asked.

"Letters?" echoed the other. "Have you been looking about the room for letters?"

"Assuredly."

For an instant Maris turned her face away. "I think I heard Dwight say that something had come for you. But, Ruth, — don't you like your room at all?"

"Of course, dear," said Ruth kindly. As if recollecting a forgotten duty, she came up now, to brush Maris' cheek with cool, elastic lips. "It is quite charming in every way, though entirely too ornate for a practical person like myself." Here she touched a spike of hyacinth which seemed to spring back indignantly from her hand. "And, really, I must ask you to have these flowers removed. They are extremely unhygienic in a sleeping apartment."

"I will go now and send a servant up at once," said Maris, turning away hurriedly that she might not betray the quiver on her lips. "Do you want your letters sent up at the same time?"

"If you will be so good," answered Ruth, smiling

brightly. "After a cold bath, a change, and a glimpse at my letters I'll be quite fit again."

Maris went swiftly from the room; once outside, she walked more slowly, her head bent over. In starting down the stairway she caught a fresh glimpse of the red scar on her gown, and saw that the mud was beginning to dry in patterns like the square mesh of a sieve. She went into her chamber for a clothes brush, then passed out through her dressing room to a small, private upper "gallery" belonging to the suite, that the red dust could be brushed away more easily. The outer flakes came off, but she soon saw that the deeper stain could not be removed by any simple method, perhaps not at all. It was a charming house-gown of dull gray tissue over gray silk, the only colors being a little hand embroidery of copper, black and cream at throat and sleeves and around the hem. She was still vexed and perturbed that she should have wrought such damage by her carelessness, and, incidentally, have fallen a notch lower in her sister-in-law's calm eyes. Though really Ruth's senior by several years, Maris had the feeling, in her presence, of youthful crudity as well as ignorance. She sighed now, let the gray folds fall, and went into her dressing room to replace the brush.

She did not ring for a servant, but deciding to go in person, went down her private flight of stairs that led directly to the lower back gallery of the main floor, and thence to the kitchen and the servants' quarters. Before she was half way down, the sound of excited voices behind the closed kitchen door told her that unusual altercation was in progress. On the one side was the cook, Aunt Mandy, a professed "'fo de Wah nigger," intolerant of modern upstart ways among her kind, — on the other were Archer, a society leader of dusky Sidon, and the

young mulatto girl, Poline, whose term at the famous "cemetery" of Mr. Booker Washington gave her the right, she claimed, to expound inflammatory doctrines.

Maris could not hear the words as yet; all was a blurred confusion of rich, throaty voice. Suddenly there was a gasp, a silence, the sound of hurrying feet, and a frightened squeal from Poline. Then the deep tones of Aunt Mandy boomed forth. "Git outer my kitchen! Git outer my kitchen, I say, or stop talkin' dat circumgiverous fool-talk. Moses! But it's ernuff to giv' a lamper-eel de toof-ache."

Poline giggled hysterically. "Ef Aunt Mandy don't beat all!" she tittered.

Maris could see Archer's back against a nearer window, and beyond the fat old cook, beside the stove, brandishing a huge ladle that had just been taken from the "gumbo."

"Dey ain't no need fer vi-lence, Mi's Blake — Aunt Mandy, I mean," protested Archer, correcting himself hastily as the ladle made a belligerent swoop in his direction. "But you mustn't blind yo'se'f to de facts uv de truth, dat our down-trod race mus' cling together. Sassieties, — Organizations, — Per-pective Unions, — in dem is our trus'!"

"Huh!" grunted Aunt Mandy, leaning to stir her soup. "De ole fashioned buryin' sassieties is all right. We all knows we is got to die, and we all hopes to git buried; but dese here new fangled perpective ones, — dey ain't wuth er pinch er snuff to er grass-hopper. I jined dat Roostervelt Orchestration when all de rucus an' hullabaloo was goin' on; and de Walkin' Delicate got mo' money outer me in a week dan de Assimilated Daughters uv de Shining Doves has collected in a year. An' de Doves is pledged befo' de Law to bury me. De las' one on 'em will hab convulsions on my grave ef I asks 'em, an' de loudes'

mouthed preacher in de county is already hired to preach de sermon. What's de Roostervelts gwinter do fer me, livin' or dead? "

"But, my deah Mi's Blake, — " ventured Poline.

"Aint I done tole you to stop dat fool 'Mi's Blakin'' me?" cried Aunt Mandy. "My ole Marster in Virginny was named Blake, but dat don't make me no Mi's Blake."

Here Maris, after having composed her face as best she could, opened the door.

"Good Lord! How you scairt me, Mi's Alden," cried Poline, with her usual affected shriek.

"I want you to go up to Miss Ruth's room at once," said Maris, "and bring down that pot of hyacinths."

"Yes'm, — and what am I to do with them?" asked the girl who always spoke grammatically when she had time to arrange her sentences.

"Oh, I don't know," said Maris wearily. "Perhaps you would like to have them in your room. They are very pretty."

"Thank you," said Poline, very correctly. "But they are not healthy in a bedroom."

For a moment the mistress was dumb. It was a relief when Aunt Mandy, taking in the situation, said eagerly, "You mean dem sweet-smellin', chunky flowers in er blue soup-tureen, Mi's Maris?"

"Yes, would you like them?"

"I sho' would," said the cook, fervently. "I only heard dis mornin' dat one uv de Doves was took down sudden wid sech a misery in de bres' dat she may not las' till night. Dem flowers would sho' make dey mark at her funeral!"

"Accept them with my compliments, Aunt Mandy," said Maris.

Poline was leaving the room. In passing Archer, Maris noticed that she shot toward him a triumphant

glance. Poline evidently felt that in some dim, unexplained way, she had gotten a rise out of her Southern mistress. When she was completely out of sight, Maris turned to the boy.

"Come with me, Archer. Mr. Alden has some letters for his sister. I want you to take them up to her."

They found Mr. Alden in the drawing room. He was in his favorite chair, and had just begun to cut the pages of a new magazine. This he put down, to feel about in his pockets for letters. There was one for Ruth, with the post-mark "Wellesley."

"Go into my study across the hall," he said to Archer. "There is a larger envelope and some papers on my desk for Miss Alden."

When Archer had gone his master lifted a vivacious face. "After all, it's rather jolly to have Ruth here, — now isn't it?" he said.

"Indeed it is," answered Maris, trying her best to smile. She caught her under-lip cruelly between small, white teeth, and bent over toward the fire, pretending that one of the andirons needed straightening. Quick as she was, her husband had seen her face and knew that something was wrong.

"My darling girl, — what is it?" he cried, in consternation.

"Oh, nothing, — nothing, — don't notice me," she whispered, now at the limit of self-control.

"Nonsense, I must notice it. Something has hurt you." He would have risen, but she, in a passion of tears, threw herself upon his breast, pressing her convulsed face against him until it was physical pain to both, yet striving, as he could see, at every instant, to overcome her agitation. In vain he soothed, comforted and questioned. Out of her disjointed phrases he could catch only the words, "Love me, — love me,

— love me! ” A little later, when the first paroxysm was spent, she rose, dragging him upward with her. “ Let’s go up-stairs, — to our room. And please, don’t ever — ever — tell Ruth that I cried like this.”

Maris, during the afternoon of that day, remained in her room. After an hour with her, Dwight went into the “ city,” where he had promised to attend an important business meeting; and Ruth, more than contented to have the long afternoon to herself, did not appear in the drawing room until after the lights were on. She had changed her travelling attire for a paler gray skirt, plain, but of perfect fit and “ hang,” and a dainty lingerie waist, the thinness of which made Maris shiver. Her ruined tea-gown had given place to a Quaker-like suit of brown.

Dwight, glancing toward her with some apprehension, (he had left her asleep after the long spell of crying) thought he had never seen her appear more charming or more self-possessed. He noticed, too, that Ruth sent her sister-in-law more than one approving glance.

These two, in their infrequent meetings in the North, had been little more than strangers. At the time of her brother’s somewhat sudden marriage, Ruth had been abroad with a party of friends, and did not return to America for a year. Afterward, her duties at school, and the summer visits made among her friends and colleagues, gave plausible excuse for equally brief visits to her brother’s home.

Dwight was more fond and proud of his brilliant young sister than he realized. As for Maris she had become to him, a passion, — a joy, — an ever-deepening wonder. That these two beings, each so dear to him, should be dear, each to the other, became now, quite suddenly, one of the most important

objects in life. Chiefly for this the unusual gentleness and dignity of his wife delighted him, for he knew there was no better way to win the regard of Ruth.

Through that day, and the next and next, Maris did not change. Seldom had she remained one woman for so long a time. Hour after hour she would sit near the two, listening to discussions, sometimes profound, upon those questions of sociology, of capital and labor and reform, with which America is now vital. She saw Dwight's eyes brighten at certain reminiscences in which she, his wife, could bear no part; but if she felt chagrin, betrayed none. She seemed quite humble, grateful for the scraps of wisdom which fell from tables so much more abundant than her own.

On Sunday morning the three went to service at "St. John's." The old minister noted them at once, and Maris could see that he studied the face of her husband. On the drive home Dwight asked his sister how she liked the sermon. Her reply, prompt and decisive, was this, "Even more anæmic than the usual run of sermons, — and I had actually expected something real to issue from that fine, straight old mouth."

"He is an ornament in the pulpit, that's sure," said Dwight. "Perhaps it was the chief reason he was called here. I fancy they don't want any militant Christianity so near the mills. By the way, he is a friend of Maris. He called here earlier in the week. How did you like him, dear? Is he any more impressive on the social plane?"

Maris answered rather slowly: "He is old, and he is tired of being hurt. That's why he seems so colorless."

"Fancy! How interesting," said Ruth. The stilted phrase was meant sincerely. She turned her quick,

intelligent eyes to Maris. "Do you know, I felt something of the kind by instinct. While he was drawling out those doctrinal platitudes, I said to myself: 'That is not the real man speaking. Either he is self-exhausted, or, for some reason, cannot speak freely. Do you suppose it can be the latter?'"

"I cannot tell you that," said Maris, in a colorless voice. Ruth's eyes went, questioning, to her brother, but he, likewise, could give no reply.

"It is quite generally believed, in the North," the girl went on, "that in these prosperous mill towns, the clergy do not dare to attack existing evils. In fact, they are forbidden to by their rich vestry and pew-holders."

"I don't know a thing about it," said Maris, still more inanely. Yet it was evident that neither she nor Mr. Alden was quite at ease. Ruth's dainty nose went up in the air. "If such a thing is true, — think what a cad the complacent minister must be!"

All were relieved to find themselves, at this moment, under the porte-cochère. At luncheon Dwight took the lead in conversation, and afterward went off to his study for a smoke. The two young women were left to entertain themselves as they could, in the big drawing-room. Their methods of accomplishing this were characteristic. Ruth went to the pretty writing desk in a sheltered corner, and began the writing of countless letters; Maris, in a deep chair by the fire, lay back, quite idly, staring at the coals and dreaming.

The heavy gray pall of clouds still wrapped a discouraged world, but, toward sunset, a peculiar light, creeping in through the translucent curtains, drew Maris to her feet. By this time, Dwight had rejoined them, and was sitting near his wife.

Maris hurried to a window facing the west, threw

aside the curtains with an impatient hand, and pushed up the window sash. "It's really clearing off. Oh, come! See how the sun is fighting these last clouds!"

The others joined her, and Ruth, after a little gasp of delight, ran out through the front door, and down to the lowest marble step. Both wind and rain were gone. To west and south and east could be seen, in a single sweep of the eye, the splendid panorama of the sunset. Far to the west, where a succession of low hills led into purpling distance, the great sun, subdued so long, was in a death-grapple with dark, elemental shapes. Rolling and twisting in the heavens, now blackness and now fiery, molten light was uppermost. Directly over the battle, a flying scud of clouds, like a fleeing army, hurried to right and left; and where they had been, the sky-field showed like a floor of gentian blue. Off to the east, the hump of Red Horse Hill gleamed, a single garnet under the long rays of the sun, while back of it, beyond the bristling mane of trees, the sky had changed into a luminous chrysophrase.

"And yet we are told that the impressionists exaggerate," said Ruth to her brother, who now stood near. "Dwight, suppose you wanted to paint that green slab of sky, — what colors would you choose?"

"Absinthe, and verdigris, and powdered opals," replied Dwight instantly, "But then, you know, I wouldn't ever be such an ass as to try."

"Ah, the sun has won," Maris was saying, half to herself. "See the last cloud go creeping down the hill. Now we shall have the beautiful days again."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FLOWERS THAT WERE NOT GATHERED

MARIS' prophecy was verified, next morning, by a day, twin sister to that perfect first of March, a week before. The lurking shadows in the great Brattle mansion were drawn out into sunlight and, for the moment, dissolved. The new week began almost merrily. Each member of the household had much to do, — Dwight to redress his somewhat neglected attendance at the mill, Ruth the sunning and airing of her belongings and the rearrangement of her room, and Maris, with not only the big house and its domestic machinery to superintend, but also renewed work on the unfinished garden for which, now, a great express order of flowers and shrubs had arrived, and must be planted.

The early days of the week ran pleasantly on. More than once Maris, pointing upward to the crest of Red Horse Hill, declared that she could see the green on the spring tips deepening, and knew that, before many more days, the yellow jessamine would be swinging its perfumed wreaths. "And oh, to think of gathering it once more!" she cried in an ecstasy. "Do you remember, Dwight, when I was so sick at the hospital, how I thought I was gathering sprays of it?"

"I should say so," returned her husband. "The nurse and I used to puzzle over what kind of vegetable it could be."

"Vegetable!" mocked Maris, in disgust. "It is hardly so gross a thing as a flower. Rather is it a child of the sun and the young spring winds. It scarcely seems to touch the earth. Oh, I shall show you some now, in a day or two, and make you understand. Just the first morning I can spend away from my poor, bare, artificial garden, I want you to take me a long, long drive, — 'over the hills and far away!' Oh, I can hardly wait! We must go soon, — just you, and Peggy and me."

Peggy, a member of the family not hitherto introduced, was a beautiful Kentucky mare. Her name, in spite of its bucolic sound, was a feminized abbreviation of "Pegasus," the nearest in decorum, as Maris said, that they could come to it.

Old Dr. Singleterry had not called again; but more than once when Maris was in the garden directing the negro laborers, he had paused at the fence, showing great interest, and proffering, in his courtly way, most excellent advice. He had not touched again upon distressing topics, and Maris was intensely thankful for this, — thankful, too, that he was evidently determined to leave the question of her wrong-doing in abeyance, and look upon her still as the child of his old friend, — the little Maris he had known and loved many years ago.

After hours of inward trepidation and a most illogical attempt to balance the advantage and disadvantage of a partial disclosure, Maris had confessed to her husband her former close acquaintance with the minister, and the fact that he was her father's dearest friend. When Dwight gave evidence of a desire to probe her motives in denying, on the instant, so worthy an intimacy, she changed, with one of her bewildering transitions, into a frightened child, saying that in the stress of a sudden agitation she

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should not be held responsible for word or deed; and that, if Dwight loved her, he would not wish to thrust her into a witness box for cross examination. These ultra feminine weapons silenced, as usual, while they failed to convince her husband.

By this time she felt secure in the belief that Dr. Singleterry was not to betray her, and if this dependence on his tenderness added to her hours of self-accusation, it enhanced, even more definitely, her sense of present safety.

Ruth had not yet begun visiting the mills. She was one of those rare persons who know how to wait. Her chief occupation, during her first week, was in reading and answering letters. She received, also, many pamphlets and long documents that looked like reports. Maris often wondered whether she could digest them all. Each morning, at the breakfast table this mail formed a tremulous, misshapen pyramid at Ruth's plate. The husband and wife talked, of necessity, in lowered voices, and Archer went about his duties on tiptoe while Ruth, oblivious, read and ate together. Dwight seemed to accept it as a matter of course, although he himself was careful not to read business letters in his wife's presence. Maris, in spite of herself, would sometimes turn a troubled glance upon the girl. The old-fashioned Southerners among whom Maris had been "raised," would as soon have thought of combing their hair at the breakfast table as of reading personal letters to the neglect of their companions. But of offence Ruth was frankly unconscious.

She sat on Maris' right, the heap of letters to the left of her plate, thus bringing them directly under the gaze of the hostess. It was sometimes impossible for Maris to avoid seeing post-marks; or noting, however unconsciously, the character of a written address.

On a bright morning in the second week of Ruth's arrival, the heap of letters beside her plate was conspicuously taller, and of more irregular proportions than usual. Marked copies of papers, pamphlets, brochures, circulars and missives of every kind had chosen, it would seem, this one mail for delivery. There was, in particular, a long blue envelope quite far down in the mass, that had, to Maris, a familiar and in some vague way, a disturbing look. Somehow, somewhere, in the past, she had seen or received letters that came in a long envelope of that peculiar shade. They had not been legal papers. The sick, yellow tone of those Kansas city documents was never to be forgotten or confounded. This blue tint brought half-memories less ominous than the yellow, — yet tantalizing in the nebulous suggestion of menace.

Ruth had now entered, was in her place, and, after a brief, bright nod and "Good morning," had begun her eager perusal of the letters. Papers and pamphlets were laid aside, but each letter, in turn, was read carefully. While she was thus working a deliberate way down toward the blue envelope, Maris tried to reason herself out of her faint forebodings, — strove to talk, with what animation whispering allows, with her husband, telling him her plans for garden work that day. She bent her attention deliberately to the breakfast she was eating. Aunt Mandy's cooking never failed, and Maris was trying to turn herself into a gourmand that she might appreciate, to the exclusion of other things, the quality of the fragrant coffee and the flaky crispness of the waffles. In spite of these efforts, her eyes kept turning toward the diminishing heap of letters at her right elbow.

At last the blue one was reached. It lay face down, but at the closing bore a small round seal done in a darker blue. At the first glimpse, Maris recognized

it as the official seal of the hospital, "St. Raymond's," where she was ill so long, and in the chapel of which she had become the wife of Dwight Alden. For a moment her heart turned to ice. She poured and drank another cup of coffee, and soon the stimulant revived her. Now she could laugh at herself. There was no reason why Ruth should not have friends, — more than one of them, — among the patients of St. Raymond's. It was a little world of healing in itself, and its inmates came from every corner of the land. She turned deliberately to Dwight, insisting that he take another cup to "keep her company," asking him inconsequent questions about his routine for the day, and then not listening to his replies. But would it not be strange, — a tweak of fate, indeed, — if Ruth should happen to know well any of the permanent staff of St. Raymond's? That boyish young Assistant House Physician, for instance, who was in love with herself, and had hated her for marrying another man! But no, that was too improbable; of all the great hospitals in the north, and all the earnest young doctors employed in them, it wasn't conceivable that Ruth should have formed a friendship with just this one.

Now Ruth had finished the letter in her hand, and was taking up the blue one. Maris leaned far over to the left, away from Ruth, placed her chin in her palm, and began, — this time in an ordinary pitch of voice, — a new series of half-meaningless remarks. She hardly knew what it was that she talked about. Yellow jessamines and blue violets bore some part in it. She stopped suddenly, for it seemed to her that her husband's eyes were taking on a puzzled look.

Ruth, her head over the letter, gave a low cry that had quite as much pleasure as surprise in it.

"What's up? Good news?" asked her brother.

"I shouldn't call that the most suitable term," answered Ruth without looking up. "But at least it is agreeable news. A friend is coming to the South on an errand congenial with my own."

"More female professors, — more reformers!" said Dwight, with a groan. "Keep them away from the Regina."

Ruth explained no further for the moment, but Maris, now gazing with fascinated eyes, knew well enough it was no image of a "female professor" that brought the slow, delicate flush to the girl's cheek. "After all, she is human," thought Maris. "Her heart is warm and alive, if only she finds it out in time."

"Well, when is she coming? Let us know the worst," Dwight persisted.

"It is a young physician," said Ruth, flushing a deeper pink, and looking even younger and prettier. "Not a woman physician."

"Oho!" cried her brother, delighted to have found a weak spot in the intellectual armor. "A man, — a mere man! And you blushing like a Dutch cabbage."

"Don't be so personal, — and so vulgar, Dwight," said his young sister, severely. She stood up, preparing to leave. The blue letter fell, wide opened, on the table. The girl caught it up, but Maris had already seen the handwriting, and a sickening thrill ran through her veins.

"Now, Dwight," she commanded, standing beside Ruth, "you've got to stop that silly teasing. Don't tell him a word, Ruth."

"I have absolutely nothing to conceal," said Ruth, stiffly. "It was Dwight's manner that I resented."

"O, Ruthie, you're a woman after all, and thank the Lord for it!" persisted Dwight, in great good

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humor. "Out with the name of your fascinating youth."

"Don't tell him —" Maris began, in an excitement which was not feigned, but Ruth was already repeating, in a dry, hard voice: "He is a young surgeon, and specialist on tubercular diseases, who has given courses at Wellesley. He is now being sent South to investigate tubercular conditions among the laborers of cotton mills. His name is Page, — Dr. Harvey Page. You will kindly refrain from connecting me in any foolish way with this earnest young scientist. I assure you it would be extremely distasteful to us both."

"Not to the doctor, you can bet, if you look as pretty as you do this minute," said Alden.

Maris, now in the doorway, felt that she could shriek aloud in her nervousness. "Dwight, please come with me and stop troubling Ruth. There are some household matters I must ask you about."

But he was never a man who could be hurried or pushed to a move. He stood his ground, laughing from one flushed face to the other. His eyes were now on Ruth. "Page, — Dr. Harvey Page. I'm sure I have met him. What hospital was he in?"

"St. Raymond's. Why, of course, that was the hospital where Maris was ill so long. I had not connected the two facts."

"And that was the very Page who was in love with Maris, too," laughed Alden.

"You have made a mistake in the name, Dwight," said Maris very distinctly. "It was another member of the staff who used to send me flowers."

"I am sure —"

"No, you are utterly mistaken. Young Doctor Page was kind and sympathetic, as he might be to any suffering invalid, — but beyond that —" She

tried to give a careless gesture, — to smile, — but Ruth's grave, cold eyes were on her, and she paled instead.

"I think I understand," said Ruth quietly, as she left the room.

"O, Dwight, Dwight, how could you do it!" Maris wailed.

"Do what?"

"Tell her that Page was in love with me."

"Wasn't he?"

"Yes, — no, — O, I don't remember, — I don't care. There has never been but one man on earth, and that's you. Even if he was, you shouldn't have hinted it to Ruth. Now she's going to hate me, mortally, for life."

"What are you talking about?" asked the man, utterly bewildered.

"She's interested in him. A little more, and she'd be in love with him. Didn't you see her blush? And he's a dear, honest, serious boy with a mission, — exactly suited to Ruth. And you've spoiled everything!"

"Nonsense!" he cried, the more roughly that he began to perceive the truth.

By this time they had reached his study. He gathered his handful of morning mail from the wide, flat desk, and said, a little gruffly: "Come kiss me good-by. I promised McGhee to reach the mill early, this morning."

"I'm going with you," said Maris. "Don't think for a minute that I intend to be left behind here with Ruth. Did you notice that glare she turned on me when I was lying?"

"Ruth's a lady, if she is a prig," said Alden, curtly.

"Don't you care to have me go with you?" Maris now asked him. There was such a world of pathos in her eyes and voice that he melted.

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"Of course I do, if you can get ready quickly. I've asked you a dozen times, and you always said you were too busy."

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature," Maris observed. "Besides, I want to go this morning. Look at the green on Red Horse Hill. I'll have my jessamines to-day."

"And I'll stop in the mill only a half hour or so, then take you for a drive. Does that suit your ladyship?"

"I always said you were the one utterly satisfactory being I knew. Wait here. I'll get my hat and veil before you can light that cigar. Is Peggy ordered?"

"She's at the gate."

"So she is, — the darling! Isn't it funny how much nicer horses are than some human beings?" With the last words she was on the stair. In an incredibly short time she was descending in a whirlwind, ready for the drive. A green automobile veil was draped heavily about her head and face.

Ruth, from her chamber window, watched their departure. She perceived at once the intention of her sister-in-law, and felt a faint glow of scorn at the cowardice revealed. On the other hand it was a distinct relief to be alone. The girl had been a little startled at her own emotions, the pleasure she had felt in reading of Page's coming, the flush of anger at her brother's badinage, the twinge, strangely resembling pain, which had come with the disclosure of his past interest in another woman. Her clear mind faced the situation. Page had been, no doubt, more or less interested in his patient. But how much more, — how much less, — and what was his present feeling? As has been the way of women from the beginning, Ruth, thinking the question out, depre-

ciated her own attractions and exaggerated those of her rival. She did not deny beauty to Maris. The great, unquiet, living eyes alone would have lent beauty to a plainer face. She admitted, too, a degree of fascination, particularly if one does not object to childishness in a grown woman, to a dependence on the nearest will stronger than her own, and a yielding to every passing mood. For her own part Ruth neither admired nor liked the accepted type of Southern woman. They were too concessive, — too feminine. Ruth tolerated "sex" only when bound to the chariot wheels of intellect.

After a few moments of reflection, she was entirely self-possessed. She took a seat now, not facing the window, for the passing of vehicles might have distracted the progress of her thought. Harvey Page, cruder and more impressionable three years ago, had, undoubtedly, fallen a victim to Maris' Southern wiles. Presumably Maris exerted all her femininity to bring about this result, even though, at the same moment, Dwight Alden was visiting her and surely giving more than a hint of his own attachment. The inference was not flattering to Maris, nor wholly reassuring with regard to Dwight. For the hundredth time Ruth regretted that, of all years, she should have chosen just that one to remain in Europe.

There was one more question, — and this time a personal probe. Ruth put it to herself without a tremor. Granting the previous conclusions, and, apart from her own relationship to Dwight, was the matter one to affect herself? In other words, would it have been the same if Dr. Page were another man? With her eyes still bright and steady, but her cheeks grown suddenly pink, Ruth snapped out: "It wouldn't have been the same, and you know it!"

At this she rose from her straight-backed chair and

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walked a little aimlessly across the room. All useless ornament, all fluttering bits of ribbon and of lace were gone. The small desk in the corner had a manlike outfit of bronze inkstand, blotter, pen and writing pad. On the centre table, where the hyacinths had bloomed for so brief a season, books were now scattered, the titles of which bore little relation to those usually seen in a young lady's boudoir. There was "Pragmatism" by William James, a "History of the Southern States," some recent publications of the National Child Labor Committee, with headquarters in New York, and typewritten copies of the latest Acts against unrestricted child labor in the South, passed recently in certain Southern States. Catching sight of these papers, conspicuous because of their legal size, and the use of the purple ink, Ruth's face cleared. She moved more quickly toward the table. As she advanced, a queer thing happened. There seemed to be a second young woman coming from nowhere directly toward her. With a laugh at her folly she recognized her own image in a long cheval-glass, which before this moment she had scarcely seen. One hand of the reflected figure was already on the purple pages. Ruth deliberately paused, came around from the table, and walked up to the mirror. She did not speak. For long moments her expression did not change. She only looked, wistfully, dumbly, a little wonderingly, as Eve might have gazed into her own girlish, unfamiliar face in some clear garden pool. But when, at last, she turned away, there was the flicker of a dimple at the corner of her lips.

Now she went up to the table, took up a paper with a determined hand, found a cosy chair and corner for herself, and, in a few moments, had forgotten the very existence of such frail units

as herself, young Page, and the incalculable sister-in-law.

Meanwhile, on the red clay roads, Peggy was picking a slow and disdainful way. One could see her dainty nostrils curl. She did not like the mud to accumulate on her feet, but, as Maris gravely told her, it was so much easier to scrape it from four slender hoofs, than from the entire bulk of the motor-car.

They had descended their own hill-slope to the east, forded the slushy dip of the valley, and, branching off from the main thoroughfare which would have led them by "St. John's" and the Rectory, had taken the wavering country road up Red Horse Hill. The recent days of sunshine had already given Spring the freedom of the land. On every side verdure was deepening in tone, and dandelions held up their small gold discs for polishing. In villa gardens, and against the stone foundations of the houses, chickweed and timothy-grass exploded. Mocking-birds sang recklessly on fence-posts and on chimney-tops.

"There will be yellow jessamine. There *will* be yellow jessamine!" cried Maris, more than once. Free, for the time being, from all apprehension, she had hurled herself into an elfin mood of joy. Never had she seemed to her husband more childlike, more enchanting, or more incomprehensible. Now she would echo the whirr of some jay-bird, or enter into grave discourse with a rabbit, perched on its haunches beside the road. Nearing the crest of forest she cried out that she saw fairies hanging green lanterns among the trees. At sight of the first great violet she grasped her husband's arm. "Look at it. Take off your hat to the lady, Dwight!"

It was all sweet fooling to the practical business

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man. At such moments faint stirrings of his own vague youth came back to him. He began now to speak of early summers spent among the White Mountains of New England, and of certain boyish escapades. Once Maris stopped him. "You actually stole apples, — *you?*" she asked, incredulously; and when he had repeated the delinquency, rose on her feet to kiss him, crying aloud: "I didn't know that anything could make me love you harder!"

By this the strip of woods running along the narrow table-land of the summit had been reached. "Give Peggy the reins, and let us forget everything but that we are here together," Maris commanded.

Red maples were fairly out, and the deep pink Judas tree. The dogwoods were beginning to unfurl, and all across the earth, upspringing through the fallen leaves of last year, the huge wood-violets seemed to regard them steadily, each with its single, yellow eye. Their curious air of alertness was patent, even to Dwight. He spoke of it to Maris, laughing.

"They won't keep it up long," she said, with a wave of her hand toward them. "As soon as we are out of sight, they'll pop down again."

"Don't you want to get out here and gather some?" asked Dwight. "McGhee can wait a bit longer."

"No, for they'd only fade. Besides, no jessamine has waked up just here. I'll gather a lot of all kinds of flowers on the way back, after the tiresome mill business is over."

"Well, then, I guess we'd better be moving. Get up, Peggy!"

"We're nearly to the other side now," grumbled Maris. "I can hear the shiver of that horrible mill. Somehow I am afraid of it."

She spoke no more until the farther side of the copse was reached, then, looking round at her, Dwight

saw that her eyes were tightly shut, and her hands against her ears. "You might as well look and have done with it," he laughed, pulling her hands away. "What a little coward you are, Maris!"

"I know it. I didn't say I wasn't!" sighed she, opening her eyes slowly. She gave a little gasp of dismay. "Now isn't that village frightful, even to you?"

"It is pretty fierce," admitted the man, staring down as she was staring. "But, even then, it's better than some of them."

The hillside, sloping downward from Peggy's feet to the valley, was bare of tree, shrub or grass. Here and there a living stump was left, and from it sprang a few, pale twigs of green. In the hot midsummer drought and sun, these, too, would perish. The bare, unpainted cottages were set with as much regularity as the conformation of the hill allowed. All were built on exactly the same model, a chimney in the centre, a room on each side, and one small closet or wing-room at the back, generally used as a kitchen. In front were small, square porticos with a roof overhead and four unplanned posts, known in the vernacular as "two-by-fours." From the verandah a steep flight of unpainted steps led down to the earth. Apparently the one precaution for health was shown in the height of the cottage foundations. Each was held up by four stilt-like, slender piers of red brick, covered at the base with a thick green mould which gradually became thinner in the ascent. Between several groups of the cabins, red "gullies" were already being washed out of the clay. To an experienced eye it was a matter of a few years more, and these neglected rills would become chasms, threatening the destruction of the village. It was a mark of indifference to beauty, the lack of any feeling

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of attachment to the soil, that these menacing scars were ignored. In those which already impinged upon the kitchen wings of houses, dish-water, offal and refuse were poured, and, though so early in the spring, flies had begun to gather in swarms. In a few weeks more, mosquitoes would add their unwholesome presence.

Few of the cottage windows were draped, and in none was there the slightest attempt at ornament. Even the tin tomato can with its geranium cuttings, so often seen in a negro dwelling, was a stranger to these. The effect of the village, after the first sensation of mere ugliness, was that of desolation. One could fancy it plague-stricken, and suddenly emptied. At a casual glance, not one human figure was to be seen in all the windows, the porches, or moving upon the sunlit roads. Only the mill was active, sending out, incessantly, its smoke and steam and noise.

"Are the people all dead?" asked Maris. "Or has the mill dragged them into its jaws, and chewed them up? Ugh! Its red walls are soaked in blood."

"It makes a pretty fine appearance to me," said Alden. "Look at those freight cars backing out now to the main track. That all means profit."

"I see one living creature," said Maris, shading her eyes to stare along the houses. "Some one in an old rocking-chair, on a gallery. Don't you see, — half-way down the hill?"

As if it heard her at this distance, the figure turned, — rather rolled in his chair, glanced upward, then stretched out two thick arms in a gigantic yawn and settled back to his nap.

A violent shudder passed over Maris. "It is a drunkard, — a diseased drunkard. I don't want to look that way any more."

"Well, don't," said Alden. "We'll have to pass by his house, but you can keep your head averted."

They had begun the descent, Peggy, with difficulty, keeping a footing on the slimy road. She expressed disgust and disdain in every curve of her beautiful, lithe body.

"Are we near that horrid looking man?" asked Maris, holding her veil about her.

"Quite close, — but he has turned his face. You can't see it."

"I don't want to," said she. "Now, have we passed?"

"Yes, now he's behind us. What a fanciful being you are!"

"I don't know what it was about him," said Maris, in deprecation. "He looked so lazy, and greasy, even at that distance. I'm glad we are past him."

The roar of the mill now dominated space. Earth shivered to it, and the hollow cottages caught and echoed it. The hum and buzz, at first indistinguishable in the general roar, now yielded component vibrations, the sound of a mighty wheel, the rhythm of the engine, the hiss of a great band, and the rattle of countless looms. A most unusual odor, something, Maris thought, like the odor of caged beasts, issued from it, befouling the clear spring air. It was a mingled smell of grease and heat; the sickening taint of starch through which the warm cloth was always passing, of overheated rooms, unclean humanity, and a touch of disease.

The great edifice, in spite of its lofty tower and imposing walls, did not possess an entrance worthy of the name. In such enterprises utility and cheapness usually dominate. So with the Regina; the curved car-railings were allowed to run up to the door itself, and, deflecting a few yards, pass into the lower pack-

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ing-room. Peggy must needs feel a precarious way over slag, and coke and other refuse, before she could drag the buggy near the two painted panels that formed the main entrance door.

Before they had fairly stopped, McGhee, genial, smiling, in a blue shirt, and crimson tie, was upon them. "Glad to see you, boss. Been needin' you. Good-mornin', madam. This is an honor the Reginy didn't anticipate. Pretty day we've got up for you, ain't it? Goin' through the mills?"

Maris tried to smile as she shook her head. McGhee was an attractive figure, and his fine blue eyes showed a clear depth as he gazed upward, boldly, into the faces above him. His laughing mouth disclosed a set of perfect teeth; his hair was crisp, golden-brown, and clustering in small curls about his forehead and on his neck. Alden showed plainly his liking for the man, and responded to his hearty greetings with some warmth. But Maris, staring downward, felt a sort of nausea of remembrance. Of exactly this type of animal beauty was the man who had played upon her girlish imagination, persuaded her into marriage against her father's will, and afterward had put upon her the double wrong of infidelity, and the theft of their child. So vividly was the face of James Martin brought before the woman's shrinking eyes, that the belief in his death wavered. Somewhere, in some corner of this wide land, he must still be alive, ready to come upon her, to torture, and to add new wrongs. Then she thought of the yellow certificate from Kansas City, and the terror passed.

"Perhaps it is as well for us, McGhee," Mr. Alden was saying to his superintendent, "that Mrs. Alden takes no interest in machinery or laborers. But I warn you to keep a lookout for my sister."

McGhee delicately turned his head to eject a long, brown stream of tobacco juice. When he smiled upward again, the teeth were white and perfect as grains of new corn, and his red lips undefiled. "Lord, yes," he answered, "I knew that she'd be after me sooner or later the first minute I clapped my eyes on 'er. Reformer an' Boston School Marm is writ all over her pretty face. Most likely she'll begin with the Kindergarten stunt, playgrounds and all them frills. She's dead sartin' to require one uv your empty cottages fer a schoolhouse. Well, sir; it's up to you!" The speaker grinned more broadly, his eyes twinkling with fun. Maris leaned back that she might not look at him.

"We needn't worry about that, yet. I have suggested to my sister that she inspect adjacent mills before trying the Regina," he said.

"That's all right, too. Let her inspect and write up reports on the others, but start up her reforms in our mill. Looks well fer us, as broad-minded, charitable citizens, you know." McGhee's careless face had suddenly grown older, more shrewd. "She can't do us no harm, when it comes to that. She'll drop it in a few weeks' time, — they all do! Lord!" he added, after a second and more voluminous expectation, "if the ladies think they're gittin' their own way, it's enough. Ain't that so, Mi's Alden?"

Maris, thus dragged into the conversation, asked a question of her own. "The law forbids any children under twelve to work in the mills, does it not?"

"That's the popular belief, ma'am," said McGhee.

"Then there must be lots of children who could go to such a school."

McGhee could not restrain his laughter. "That don't follow, — not in these parts," he said. "Children under twelve don't get born any more. It's

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from the cradle to the loom, fer them! Why, I know one married couple as has eight kids, all so high," roughly he measured on the air the height of a six years' child, "and danged if the whole bunch isn't jes' over twelve,—an' no twins, either!" He laughed coarsely, but Alden, showing for the first time a hint of displeasure, began to step down from the buggy, saying, "We'd better go in and look at the new machine. I've promised to take Mrs. Alden for a drive." He turned toward his wife. "You are sure you won't be frightened out here, alone?" he asked.

"Peggy and I will be all right, if you don't stay too long," she answered. "But don't make it very long. This huge mill seems to be creeping by inches upon me."

"It certainly is funny how noises get on a woman's nerves," remarked McGhee, as the two men entered the mill. "Lots uv them are that way. I've known female hands go plumb daft with it. As for me I got to lovin' it years ago. I can't hardly get to sleep at night without it, and all day Sundays I am buttin' about like a critter under a glass bell."

Maris, left strangely alone as soon as the office door was closed, let the reins sag in her hand, and stared about. The dead mill village on its fiery slope ran up, before her, almost to the refreshing strip of green that crowned the hill. Close to her right the mill shivered, and shrieked and roared as of its own volition, giving no hint of human occupancy. Not even a stray animal, dog, horse, or the ubiquitous goat was visible.

Half idly her fancy began to weave similes for the noises of the mill. Now it was as the sound of incessant, frantic traffic on a rough stone road. She heard the wheels, the clatter of hoofs, cracking of

whips, curses of drivers, and, at times, the shriek of some living victim gone down under the juggernaut of trade. Now there was a slight softening of all sounds, and they began to flow together through a rocky mountain gorge, set with great boulders, each of a different size. Maris closed her lids to gain a clearer impression. Yes, she could almost place, by ear, the jagged edges of the stream, the new eddy forming to the fore of the largest boulder. Then all at once the sounds leaped to a higher key, the noise redoubled, the stones became hollow so that each roared and reverberated on a different note. She opened her eyes hastily, looking toward the mill for a possible cause. A small door, hitherto unnoticed, had been thrown wide, almost at her elbow. From it escaped a thousand fleeing demons of reverberation, and she heard the undulating clatter of the looms, the falsetto shrills of the spool-room, and the low, cruel purr of the great band upon the gigantic wheel.

Staring within, she caught a glimpse of a wide, dusty room, where cotton-bales were heaped upon the floor at irregular intervals, or set on end, like boxes, against the walls. A few stalwart negro men moved about with deliberate steps, plunging short cotton hooks into the bales, and dragging them slowly, across the flooring, to a freight elevator.

As yet the person who had opened the door remained unseen. He now appeared, tottering and grasping at the wall, so that at first Maris thought him drunk. A terrible attack of coughing made him pause outside the door, and prevented him from closing it. An overseer performed this service, kicking the door together with his foot, and sending a scowl and a curse to the convulsed creature who had opened it. Instantly the sounds became sub-

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dued. In contrast the air seemed almost quiet, except for the racked human figure who coughed, and coughed, tearing apart, it would seem, the very walls of his frail body. Maris had, at first, felt the faint, sickening thrill which all such distress had power to cause her, but afterward, compassion made her forget her own repulsion, and she leaned over with outstretched hand, wishing to speak to and comfort the suffering creature. Even after scrutiny she could not determine whether it was a small and shrivelled man, or a young boy, prematurely old. The coughing stopped for a moment, not without loss of blood, and its victim sagged against the wall, utterly spent, Maris, pulling her veil aside, called out to him. He had not noticed her before. Now, after one glance at the sleek buggy and its occupant, he gave a frightened start, flattened himself still closer to the wall, and, with a sidling motion like that of a poisoned rat, dragged himself by inches across the front of the mill, and disappeared around the farther end.

Maris herself felt ill, and faint, and poisoned. Was it such misery as this that Ruth was hoping to alleviate? And could there be other such wretches in the mill?

She stared upward again to the village, and saw, half-way up the slope, the sick man (or drunkard) she had passed. His face, now turned to her, was a red blotch no larger than one's finger nail. Again she shuddered, and drew her eyes away.

From around the corner of the mill a horseman now emerged, and, with kicks and with lashings of a long rawhide whip, goaded his lean animal up the uneven slope into the village. At sight of him the man on the porch sat up. In spite of her repugnance, Maris found herself watching the pantomime. The horseman rode directly to that cottage, reining his

steed beside the steps. The figure on the porch gave a few languid gestures and then, as if suddenly roused to excitement, rose from his chair and waddled into the house. An instant later he reappeared, dragging a little girl.

Maris now recognized the rider as a "Whipper-in," that indispensable employee whose chief duty it is to go among the houses, rousing up sick or truant children, and whipping them back to their labor. Even at this distance the child seemed weak, — unable, almost, to keep upon its feet. It pleaded with the horseman who, in turn, referred the matter to the owner of the house. This lordly being now gave answer by a terrific blow on the child's head, sending it bodily down the steps. Maris gave a scream and shut her eyes. Peggy, taking alarm, darted forward. By the time the animal was quiet, and Maris ventured another shuddering look in the direction of the cottage, the small figure was on its feet, running down the road, closely followed by the whipper-in. Once she swerved and, it would seem, was trying to escape. With a dexterous jerk of the rein the rider was before her, and had given a cruel cut with his long lash. The child, now crying aloud with pain, came straight toward the mill. Maris could hear the thin edge of its wail even above the roar of the machines. The man kept close behind. Now again the whip was raised. Maris stood straight up in the buggy. "Don't you dare touch that child again," she screamed. "My husband shall discharge you!"

At this moment Alden and McGhee came out. "Jim Winch's little gal been playin' hookey again?" remarked the latter, as he glanced casually at the child.

"He was beating her, as if she had been a dog!"

cried Maris, now shivering from head to foot. "Dwight, — send him off, — discharge him!"

McGhee smiled easily. "Not him, lady," he said, after his customary ejection of tobacco fluid. "The ole Reginy couldn't git along without Mr. Tate. Best whipper-in in Dixie-land, — that's what Tate is."

Tate, squirming coyly on his horse, acknowledged the tribute with a sheepish grin, while the child, finding herself unnoticed, slipped in by the small door from which the human rat had emerged.

"You will do nothing, then?" asked Maris of her husband. She had pulled down the long green veil, but her eyes flashed through it.

"I cannot discuss it here," said Dwight in a low tone.

Silently they started out upon the drive so long anticipated. Joyousness had fled from Maris, and she sat at her husband's side, silent and preoccupied.

Once Alden forced himself to speak of the distressing scene that both had witnessed, but Maris checked him saying: "Not now, — it is too new."

The sun was swiftly drying the surface of the red clay roads. Peggy went lightly, drawing them down violet studded slopes, and up through woodland copses hung in golden loops of jessamine. But Maris gathered no flowers on that spring day.

CHAPTER SIX

A MINOR CRISIS

ON returning from the drive, Maris pleaded headache and went directly to her room. Neither Dwight nor Ruth saw her again until that evening at dinner where, dressed in black, her pale face and utter lack of appetite fully bore out her previous statement of fatigue. Ruth had, of course, believed it to be merely another phase of evasion. She now felt a little remorseful and ashamed. There was a third sensation, equally unfamiliar, in wait for her. Immediately after dinner Maris drew near, put her arm through that of Ruth, and asked for a few moments alone in Dwight's study, where they would not be interrupted.

Now it was Ruth's turn to shrink. She knew, instinctively, that it was of Dr. Page Maris wished to speak, and did not relish having the initiative taken in this bold manner. Maris' first words confirmed her suspicions.

"Ruth," she began at once, "I don't want any misunderstandings between us that can be avoided. You must listen to me quietly, while I tell you the facts of my brief acquaintance with Dr. Harvey Page."

"He is my friend," said Ruth, coldly. "Are you sure that I should listen?"

Maris' eyes gave just one flash. "I speak, not in my own person, but as your brother's wife," she answered, gravely. Her manner was controlled,

her eyes calm and steady. Ruth grudged the admiration she could not withhold.

"Don't make the mistake," she said, now rather hurriedly, "of thinking my friendship for Dr. Page other than it is."

"I'll try to avoid that particular mistake," said Maris, with an intonation and fleeting smile that made Ruth feel somewhat young and foolish. "Shall we not sit down?"

They seated themselves near the corner of the great, flat library table, spread smooth with dull green morocco, and edged with a heavy carved border of mahogany. From this instant, the fundamental differences in temperament and character of the two were plainly demonstrated. Ruth sat upright, her shoulders touching the wood of the chair-back, her slim, cool hands lying motionless in her lap. Maris, on the contrary, bent forward, her left elbow on the table, her left hand now propping her cheek, now flung out across the table, her right tracing nervously the carved pattern of the border. Yet her words, when she spoke, were as straightforward as any Ruth could have chosen.

"While I was ill in St. Raymond's hospital, and before I dreamed that your brother cared enough for me to ask me to be his wife, this young Dr. Page had a sort of boyish fancy for me."

"Dr. Page is now nearly twenty-nine; and you have been married to my brother just three years," said Ruth.

"I see your inference," answered the other; "and yet I repeat that this fancy was immature. Perhaps, — I —" here she caught her lip for an instant then went on bravely: "Perhaps — I — tried to draw out his feeling, — to comfort myself with his generous sympathy. I was very unhappy at the time, —

very lonely, — and when one has been ill a long, long time — ” she checked herself, suddenly, for Ruth’s hardening face was saying that this was not the time or place to work upon her sympathies.

“ Why should you take for granted that I am interested, either in your sentiments or those of Dr. Page? ” the girl asked, relentlessly.

For a moment Maris was utterly taken aback. Ruth’s eyes were gleaming at her through visor-bars of steel. If she faltered now, never again would she have the courage to front this young Amazon. What feeble weapons she had possessed Maris threw down. Her hope now lay in her own sincerity, and in the latent woman-heart of Ruth. “ Because, dear Ruth,” she pleaded, rather than spoke, “ I know that he is fine, and honorable and good. I know, too, that if you have let him get even a glimpse of the real Ruth, he must care for you. You two are suited, absolutely — ”

“ This is intolerable! ” cried Ruth, springing to her feet.

But Maris was not daunted. “ And more than this, I know,” she cried, “ that of all the world can give, love is the best. You may not wish to believe it now, — but it is true! ” Her voice thrilled with the passion of which she spoke. “ Don’t find it out too late, Ruth. It is your birthright, it is your glory. No intellectual pride can fill the place of it! Love is the best, — the only good! ”

“ No one has ever spoken like this to me,” said Ruth, still angrily, though her eyes had softened.

“ No one, perhaps, has cared, just as I want to care for you, if only you will let me.”

“ I believe that you mean well, Maris,” said the girl, still more gently. “ But you do not understand a nature reserved and centred, as mine is. My life

must be ordered by myself alone. I cannot be interfered with by any outside person, — not even my brother. With regard to Dr. Page, I told you before, he is merely a friend. I like him greatly. I believe he has a mission. As to your past intimacy with him and its present status, — I must judge that, also, for myself, and after my own methods." She was standing near the door, her hand on the knob.

Maris had not risen. "And all that I have said to you makes no difference at all?" she asked, despairingly.

"I am afraid not, — as you meant it," said Ruth. "But I feel that you are sincere, and I appreciate the effort. Believe me, dear Maris, I appreciate the effort." She went, now, closing the door behind her as one goes from a sick-room.

Maris, alone, stared out through the nearest window into the night. The curved back of Red Horse Hill cut its swart rim against the yellow stars. In Ruth's last words, lurked, unmistakably, a challenge. They meant that she would wait until her friend arrived, and watch, as one watches a chemical experiment, his meeting with a woman whom he once had loved. That he had no hint of her identity, or her married relationship to Ruth, Maris was now convinced. Alden is not an unusual name either in New England or New York. Both were to be tested, deliberately, inhumanly (or so it seemed to Maris), and not for the sake of love, rather of prudence. The whole procedure was so cold, so scientific, that Maris' soul rebelled. "She's not worth saving!" cried Maris to herself. "Let her dry up into a mummy. Any man with a heart would be too good for her!" She rose now, walking impatiently up and down. Well, she had done what she could. Further worrying over Ruth's emotional affairs was useless. There

were immediate problems of her own that must be solved. Harvey was to come, and unprepared. What, for herself, was to be the result of such a meeting, — of this spiritual vivisection? Here, after all, was the burning core of the situation. Harvey Page knew what her own husband did not know, — that she had been a married woman under her maiden name of Maris Brue.

As it happened, — and fate delights, at times, in such capers, — Dr. Page had been the one to bring to her bedside a certain document from the West. Upon reading it and realizing her deliverance from a detested bond, she had become excited to the point of hysteria. He had been the one to calm her, and in the reaction she had confided the story of her suffering. Even the name of the nurse girl, Jane Rumbough, had not been withheld. She wished now that she had been stricken dumb.

After that hour neither had referred to her disclosure, but Maris' strength had rebounded as though she were lifted from foul depths to the freedom of hope; while the young doctor grew, day by day, more kind, and more openly in love. Soon she could sit by her window and receive visitors. Most constant among these came to be Dwight Alden, junior partner of the firm where she had worked. She began to realize, incredulously, at first, that he, too, cared for her; but she was entirely honest in what she said both to Dr. Singleterry and to Ruth, that she did not believe he would ever ask her to be his wife.

Then came the wonderful day when he had done so, offering all that an honorable love has to give. She remembered at this moment her sudden flush of joy, her feeling of safety, — the short, sharp, futile struggle to tell him at once the sad history of her past; and, later on, the unpalatable necessity

of announcing to Harvey Page her sudden engagement. As if it had been yesterday she recalled the flare of anger, followed by a dazed look of pain that turned his blue eyes black. He had not reproached her by a word, only turned from her in silence. That was three years ago, and she had neither seen nor heard from him since. What were his feelings now? Did he both hate and scorn her, or had he, perhaps, forgotten? Maris knew in her heart that he was not one easily to forget, nor, perhaps, to forgive. And if he now loved Ruth! It might be that he would feel it his duty to warn Ruth of her sister-in-law's duplicity, and try to ascertain at once whether the truth were ever told to Alden. Serious people like Page and Ruth had queer ideas of their duty. Maris shuddered at the thought.

If she could only meet him first, or warn him. She began to brew, hastily, foolish little plans for the accomplishment of this end, only to throw the lot away in self disgust. "No, I must face it, as I may have to face worse things," she told herself, fiercely. "I must dree my weird, — but, I'll hide myself from the furies as long as there is a niche to hide in."

"Maris," said her husband's voice at the door, "are you in there, in the dark?"

"I'm not in the dark now," cried Maris, running to the door and flinging it wide. She grasped her husband's arm, then reached down for his hand, pressing it against her cheek, and afterwards, to her lips. "Let us go back to the parlor. I tried to speak to Ruth about Dr. Page, but she wouldn't have it. Please don't refer to it again."

"You bet I won't," said Dwight, laughing. "I don't see how you dared."

When they crossed the hall, Ruth was still in the drawing-room, and began, at once, a discussion with

her brother as to the relative importance of nutrition and breathing in the reclaiming of degenerates.

Three days after, they read, in the Sidon Daily News, of the arrival at Putnam's Hotel of Dr. Harvey Page of New York City. A brief paragraph told of the object of this Southern visit, and of the eminence already attained by the young doctor in surgery, as well as in the study of tubercular diseases. The notice ended with the words: "Sidon extends a welcome to the doctor, and hopes that the sight of so many pretty faces will drive from his mind the unlovely images of germs."

"Let's have him up to dinner, at once, to-night! People appreciate it so much more while they are strange and lonely," said Maris, addressing her husband. There were times when even Maris longed to hasten the inevitable.

Ruth's head was lifted above her mail, — her even tones rang out. "Perhaps, since I am the only member of the family with whom he is in personal correspondence, the invitation should come from me."

The eyes of Maris met her fairly. They had no look of enmity or reproach, only they were disconcertingly intelligent. Ruth was annoyed to feel herself flushing.

"Sure!" said Dwight heartily, to his sister. "Maris and I will be glad to get out of the writing. Won't we, Maris?"

"Then to-night it is," said Maris, not answering her husband's question, except by a nod and smile. "And I must go plan the dinner with Aunt Mandy, before all the vegetable and other wagons have gone by."

During the forenoon Ruth was strangely restless. Immediately after luncheon, she announced her in-

tention of making her first mill visit, choosing a recently built factory to the west of the city, the "Regina" being to the east.

Through the foresight of the active committee which she represented, Ruth had been furnished with letters of introduction to various mill owners. She took such a letter with her now, more as a precaution than a necessity. She had no doubt that her request, backed by the good cause for which she was working, would open all doors. Added to this, the easy-going and chivalrous manner to women of all classes of men in the South made assurance doubly sure. It was thus a thunderbolt when, upon knocking for admission at the Ajax Cotton Mill, she was confronted by a burly ruffian who told her to "git out," as he had orders "Not to let no mischief-makin' Yankee women into them mills."

Almost suffocated with anger and indignation at this her first insult, Ruth hurried back home. For the relief of it, she searched out Maris, and related the adventure. Unfortunately, Ruth's manner of telling it, her vigorous epithets of "bounder," "rum-soaked lout," and "uncivilized clod," proved too much for the listener's sense of humor. Ruth being herself untroubled by that particular spark, made no allowances. She flaunted from the room, less mistress of herself than Maris had ever seen her.

"An unfavorable time for my test," thought Maris, when the laughter had spent itself. "But it can't be helped." Now that the hour was near, Maris longed to have it over. It was characteristic of her that although she cringed and shivered at an approaching crisis while it was at a distance, her courage increased with its nearness.

To-night while dressing for dinner she was in radiant spirits, and by her sallies through her boudoir

door kept Dwight in such continual fits of laughter that he spoiled two ties and had to demand her assistance with a third.

She had chosen to dress again all in black, though this time the small open square at the neck gave a look of distinction as well as coquetry. It was her desire to seem frail and appealing in the visitor's sight. She explained this fact elaborately to Dwight, saying that she was utterly ashamed of herself for having encouraged the attentions of so worthy a youth only to discard them at the first hint of a better man, and she was more than willing for both Ruth and Dr. Page to recognize her attitude of remorse. Now, gazing in the mirror over Dwight's shoulder, she affected great concern because of her eyes being so bright and the blood in her cheeks so warm. She tried to remedy the latter charming defect by a thick application of powder.

"Ah," she cried, pausing in the midst of this operation, "there's the bell. He's come. Ruth's already in the parlor, isn't she?"

"You may be sure she is," laughed Dwight.

"Let me go down alone to them,—just for a moment," she pleaded. "I think it will be easier for Ruth."

"You misapprehend Ruth's emotional nature, my dear," he said. "But it's all right if you wish it. How long am I to remain in limbo?"

"Only as long as one of those tiniest cigars with a gold tip," she laughed.

He smiled in response, drew out the cigar, flung himself into a chair with a long sigh to denote resignation, and thought she had already left the room, when suddenly he felt her arms about him. "Dear,—dearest,—*dearest*,—of all things," she whispered breathlessly, "I love you,—I love you,—I love

you!" She crushed her face against his, then drew back with a little cry. "Now I've gone and rubbed all the powder off one cheek! Never mind, I'll keep the whited-sepulchre side toward him!"

Now she was off, leaving her husband to brush the powder and the tobacco of his demolished cigar from his evening coat. He smiled and sighed in one. "Who ever heard of a woman like this? I shall never understand her," said Dwight to himself. After a moment, he added: "Hang it, why should I wish to try?"

In the long drawing-room down-stairs, young Dr. Page and Ruth stood on the hearth-rug, very close together; and both seemed to be talking, asking questions, and laughing at the same moment. The young man did not hear Maris enter, so softly and slowly she trailed her long black robe; but Ruth heard, and though she kept her gray eyes lifted to the eager face above her, Maris had a curious sensation that the girl possessed a second pair of eyes, invisible to ordinary mortals, and that with these she coolly watched her sister-in-law's approach.

At this Maris deliberately deflected her course to the right, so that she came up almost behind Page, standing at his elbow before he knew it.

"Dr. Page," she said softly but very clearly, "I am Maris Brue whom you knew at the hospital, and who married Mr. Dwight Alden, Ruth's brother."

In his involuntary start and impetuous wheel in the direction of the remembered voice, his back was, necessarily, turned on Ruth. That astute young woman gave a small grin of appreciation. She had no sense of humor, but wit, being more purely a thing of intellect, delighted her. She did not begrudge a "rise" taken so neatly. To the other two,

however, the matter had no hint of comedy. "Really, I had no idea," Page was beginning stiffly.

"Of course you had not. Why should Ruth ever have happened to mention an insignificant being like myself, especially when she had no idea that you had ever heard my name, — Maris Brue."

Her repetition of this full name showed Page what to avoid. He was mastering rapidly his first surprise; a look of anger and mistrust rose slowly to his face. In a moment Ruth must see it.

"Just a word more, — Dr. Page," said Maris, putting what pleading she dared into her voice, "I want you to know that I have spoken to Ruth of your great kindness to me in the hospital, and admitted to her, with shame, the poor return I gave. Is it not possible, now, to let that pass forever? to begin again as acquaintances, — only this time, I am merely Ruth's sister and her brother's wife?"

She held out her hand. Upon his taking or rejecting it depended everything. He hesitated. A little humming noise came into Maris' ears; she could feel the red drain from her cheeks and lips. She moved a few inches so that her face was hidden from Ruth by the man's broad shoulder. Now she looked squarely up to him, letting the fear of the moment show in her wonderful eyes. "Don't — hurt — me," her lips said, soundlessly.

She had found the way. It was the old, old cry to a scientist from a suffering, helpless creature in his power. He took the outstretched hand. "Since you ask it, Mrs. Alden, this is our first meeting," he said coldly, but the words were enough for Maris.

With the entrance of Mr. Alden, and under the influence of his hearty welcome and reassuring presence, all awkwardness was put to flight. From every point of view the dinner was a success. Never during

her long and triumphant career had Aunt Mandy made more incredible "gumbo filè," better scalloped oysters, or fried young chickens a more delicious brown. The hostess, it is true, ate nothing, but that gave her the greater opportunity for charming courtesies to her guest.

The conversation turned, as was inevitable, on the great problem of "Labor" which had brought the two young people to the South. Dwight fell into the arguments, giving those most plausible from the employers' point of view. The others (Maris always remaining silent), opposed him chiefly on the account of what is loosely termed "child labor," and each brought forward examples of negligence and overwork that turned one heart, at least, cold and sick within her. The color had never come back fully to Maris' cheeks, and now, though unconscious of attainment, she had fully realized her wish to seem frail and appealing. She tried not to listen. The words began to flow and reverberate together as the sounds of the great mill had flowed. Slowly, without conscious volition, she was borne along with the hypnotic vibrations. Now clearly before her eyes was set the red slope of a hill terraced with empty cottages. She gazed again, with the same peculiar shrinking, upon a formless heap of garments which she knew for a sick drunkard nodding in the sun; she watched the long, scrawny whipper-in upon his scrawny horse, and saw the two men drive, with curses and cruel blows, one helpless girl-child back to slavery. "Don't strike her! Don't you dare touch that child again!" she screamed, springing up and pointing wildly.

The others rushed to her. Dwight caught her in his arms, while Page, all scientist now and cool physician, reached for a fluttering wrist.

"O, do not trouble," gasped Maris, taking her hand away, and sinking back into her chair. She tried to laugh, asking them to forgive her for making such a spectacle of herself. "I was only dreaming awake," she said. "It was a terrible dream, but it's over now."

"My poor little Maris, my poor dear," Dwight whispered, bending close to her that the others might not hear his words. "I wish I had never taken you within a thousand miles of that cursed mill."

Page had drawn back, but was still watching her with keen eyes.

"I fear that my brother's wife has an excess of temperament," said Ruth, with an attempt to speak lightly. Her voice did not sound kind.

"Dwight, Dwight," whispered Maris, "hold my hand hard, very hard, — until you hurt me. I must not lose myself like this again."

There was a silence. The younger people, exchanging glances, were about to turn away, when Maris, to the surprise of all, sprang to her feet.

"My temperament is overthrown," she cried. "Now what do you all say to a game of bridge?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN APPARITION FROM THE PAST

DR. SINGLETERRY knelt on the walk of his tiny garden, weeding pinks. The motions of his long, white fingers were angular, deliberate, exact, for his task presented difficulties. Among the blue-green spikes of legitimate foliage upthrust usurping timothy, and the still more deceptive spears of vigorous nut-grass, offering so crafty a simulation of good faith that one must trace it to the very earth level and beneath before daring to extract it.

To root out chickweed was simple enough. It offered no problems and little resistance, coming up entire in a round green mat sprinkled with white stars for blossoms. So, too, with the lesser celadine, beloved of Wordsworth, and for that reason the more beloved of the old minister. Indeed with every up-rooting, except that of the hated nut-grass, the weeder was conscious of a small thrill of pain. To destroy a dandelion was positive torture.

There was, in Orbury, the tradition that once he had devoted an inconspicuous garden-bed to the replanting of what he called "floral rejectimenta." He would not admit the existence of so gross a thing as a weed, and to prove the argument would refer to the experience of a friend who had gone as missionary to Japan, and who had to clear his garden, every spring, of riotous forget-me-nots and orchids.

As Dr. Singleterry worked, sniffing in delight at the

fragrance of his pinks, now pausing to enjoy more consciously the warmth of the spring sun, his mind was drifting idly to and fro. And usually it fared in pleasant currents, for he was something yet of poet and philosopher, in spite of the human suffering to which he had ministered. He was thinking now of that Orbury garden of the past, where great choirs of beauty and of fragrance had answered to his care. Among the banks of flowers a little figure moved, that of Maris, the motherless child of his best friend, Daniel Brue. Now tenderly he let himself recall quaint sayings of the child, and happenings which both he and the doting father had believed to indicate unusual intelligence. Once, on receiving a small watering-pot, shining and gay with paint, she had lain awake much of the night in her impatience for morning to come that she might use it. When, after a short troubled sleep she had waked to hear the downfall of a shower, she had gone to her father, crying: "I don't thank God a bit for watering all the flowers before I got there." At the age of eight, in her first tumult of theologic doubts, she had given away most of her possessions to the darkies, including all of her dresses but the one she wore, and had wandered out into the forest to see whether the ravens would feed her as they did Elijah. At night the search-party had traced her by the sound of hysterical sobbing. No ravens had appeared, she had nearly stepped on a huge black snake which she was sure was the devil in disguise, and her faith, generally, had received a shock from which it was slow to recover.

He himself had been of that search-party, and the first to reach the shivering culprit. He saw now, as though it was before him, the small white face, the upraised terror-darkened eyes, and the quivering

lips. The woman, Maris Alden, had even yet, at times, the look of that frightened child. No longer did the old man's thoughts drift peaceably. The smile of reminiscence died on his face. The present Maris, and all the menace of her position, claimed him. She had come to him the night before, saying that she must speak to some one who knew her story, or go mad. Ruth and the young doctor, it seemed, were already deep in the statistics of child labor. They talked of nothing else. Even her husband, Mr. Alden, was being drawn into it. Each day there were new instances, new examples of cruelty and suffering so hideous to hear, that Maris, with difficulty, kept back her scream of protest. "And by my own folly, I am bound to this silence," she cried to him, desperately. "I must sit by with a smooth face while every torture they depict seems to be put, fresh, upon the body of my lost child. When I saw, last week, that wretched baby lashed down the hill like a dog, it was on Felicia's back and on mine, the blows fell. Because I do not know where she is, I suffer for her in every suffering child. I cannot live here. I shall die under it!"

He comforted her the little that he could. With Maris he needed always to remind himself that she was a sinner, living consciously with deceit and lies, and, even so, the next quiver of her lip would melt his heart, and make him yearn only to soothe what he could not help.

The old man's hand trembled a little, and he drew a long, long sigh. Then he started forward with an exclamation of dismay. He had uprooted a blossoming bush of pinks. Now he sighed for a more material cause. The bush must be transplanted at once. He sat back on his heels upon the walk, drew out an old pocket knife, carefully cut off each flower stalk and

the coarser leaves, dug the earth deeper in the scar where the bush had been, and set it back, patting and pressing the outraged roots with a tenderness that only the garden-lover can attain. Now he rose stiffly to go indoors and get some water for it. He could have called either one of the two servants, but, with such a man, gardening is not labor, but love. He would have resented any hireling bringing the water for a plant which he had uprooted and then reset. He went to the rear of the house, and seeing a glass pitcher half filled, brought it through the hallway to the front. Just as he stepped down again into the garden, the sound of feet, running as if pursued, came faintly from the lower slope of the hill. He looked closely for a moment, and saw that it was a mill woman, bareheaded, and alone, running frantically. It would be several moments before she could reach him, even at this swift speed, so he leaned over carefully, and began dripping the water in a ring, about his plant. He heard the runner nearing.

"Is that Yankee doctor here?" she gasped, before she reached him. "I've been to his hotel. He ain't there!"

There were still a few drops to be put in the heart of the plant. "No, you'll find him at the Aldens', I think. You know, — the Brattle house yonder, — on the next hill."

He turned to her, full, now, of interest in her distress. "What has befallen —" he began. Then the glass pitcher fell and broke. "My good God! Jane Rumbough!"

The woman threw up an arm, crooking the elbow to hide her face.

"What yer givin' us?" she laughed rudely. "Jane nothin'. I'm Winch's wife, — Sally Winch. Is that

the Brattle house, — that place with stone posts? ” Already she was hurrying away from him.

“ Stop, — a moment! ” he cried out. “ Is any one hurt badly in the mills? ”

“ Only a kid crushed to jelly. Nothin’ much! *My* kid! ” she called back to him, without turning her face.

The old man staggered back against the wall of his study. For once the flower beds were trodden upon. He had no eyes but for that thin, defiant figure, already in the dip of valley, now mounting the slope of the next red hill; no conscious thought except for the soundless repetition of the one name, — “ Jane Rumbough — Jane Rumbough — Jane Rumbough.”

The woman was at the Aldens’ gate, and now was at the door. A new thought, like a pain, drove through the old man’s stupor. Jane Rumbough, — and he had sent her to the house of Maris Brue!

He stretched his hand out, as if to call her back; then the limp arm fell heavily. He could no longer stand. In some way he found the study steps, and sat upon them, bareheaded, oblivious of his own tragic attitude, and of the curious glances of the passer-by.

It was Jane Rumbough beyond all doubt, though older, thinner, and with marks of poverty and misery upon her. She worked here in the mill, — in Alden’s mill, and it was her child that was hurt. These facts he repeated more than once, and gradually a future line of reasoning cleared before him. Jane, when she went from Orbury with the beast that had been Maris’ husband, had no child. Even if one were born to them in sin, that was but seven years ago, too young, it would seem, for the most careless mill to accept. But that was Jane Rumbough, and she said it was her child, “ crushed to a jelly.” Now, what to think!

The silver head fell over to the minister's shaking hands. He gave a sound that was half prayer, half groan. "Father in Heaven,— can You let *that* happen?" Confusion came like a darkness over him again. His thoughts could not go by that path. He felt that he must go to Maris, lifting bloodshot eyes to see if the house where she lived still crowned the hill. Perhaps this was all a hideous vision. Perhaps he was still in Orbury, dreaming under the pear-tree.

From the side driveway of the Brattle house a great red motor-car swept out. In it, besides the Aldens' French chauffeur, were Ruth Alden, the doctor, and the woman who said her name was "Winch." The old man strained his eyes for Maris, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Now his methodical, bachelor training stood him in good stead. He went into the house, and, still in his nightmare dream, took down his hat, brushed it, brushed off the knees of his trousers, straightened his clerical collar, and went out, walking as a sane man walks, in the direction which instinct told him he must take. As he achieved, mechanically, step after step, the familiarity of the motion began to soothe and reassure him. His knees no longer trembled; his feet took their hold on earth with sureness. He threw back his head for a long breath, then led his consciousness, as one leads a frightened horse, back to the burning issue. Now he had reached the slope of the Alden hill, and yet no sign of Maris. Looking around over his right shoulder, he saw the crimson motor-car climbing the crimson slope of Red Horse Hill, a huge beetle, just entering the strip of brown-green woods. Whose child was that "crushed to jelly"? Again the old man caught at the bit of his stampeding fancy. Hurriedly he whispered the

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words of the prayer for those "afflicted in mind, body or estate."

His hand had scarcely lifted the new patent latch to the iron gate, when Maris was on the walk, running toward him. The wide-eyed terror of a lost child was on her face. In that first moment he believed that she had recognized Jane Rumbough, and knew. Together with the stab of pity came a less worthy emotion of relief that he would not need to speak. Her first words swept away this hope.

"Oh, *have* you heard? A child, — a little girl, — crushed in the looms?"

He nodded without speaking.

"No wonder they call it the Red Village over there," she went on, with a swift look and shudder in the direction of the hill. "The woman said — its arm — was, almost torn away." Now she bent over, hiding her face in her hands, while the horror took her like an ague.

"Let us — proceed — indoors," said Dr. Single-terry. To himself his words sounded stiff — disjointed. In speaking them his jaw had a curious sense of growing rigid. He saw that Maris' suffering, genuine though it might be, was, as yet, impersonal, and, walking beside her on the cemented path, he wished that the hardened surface would split and swallow him.

"Did you see — the woman — who came?" he managed to ask, as they entered the hallway.

"The little girl's mother, do you mean? No, I was up-stairs. Ruth and Doctor Page fortunately were down here in the study, and the motor-car had already been ordered to take them to a more distant mill. Wasn't that good luck?"

"Yes," he answered, in the same stiffening way, "it might be called so. Shall we go into the study?"

Now, for the first time, she glanced up at him, as if a little perplexed. She noted the unusual pallor of a face always silver-pale, and the compressed, straight line of the lips. Silently she put a hand on his, as if claiming a closer bond in this new sympathy. The old man could have groaned aloud.

"Maris," he asked again, almost desperately, "did you not see that woman or hear her speak?"

"I told you I did not see her. Why do you ask again with that strange voice? I heard her speaking, — but not clearly. Ruth ran up-stairs to get some bandage-stuff, — and other things. She told me what I know."

Dr. Singleterry sat down heavily beside the library table, and leaned one arm upon it. Maris stood close beside him. "Are you thinking," she asked, in a low voice, "that it was very wrong of me not to come down-stairs?"

She waited for a reply, but he only shook his head.

"I wanted to go down," she went on, as if pleading. "I even started, — twice, — but that queer feeling I sometimes have held me back. You know better than any one else what has made me such a coward."

The minister moved restlessly. "My poor girl," he cried to this, "for once you must forget your cowardice. I have a strange thing to tell you."

Instinctively she drew back. A new apprehension tinged her words as she said, quickly: "To tell me? Something that concerns me, personally?" He could see that she had begun to tremble.

"Yes, you; and very closely. Try to be brave. That woman —"

"Yes, — I am listening. I am brave."

"Was, — Jane Rumbough!"

"No!" she almost screamed, and covered her face.

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It was out. The minister let his eyes fall from Maris, and sank back in the wide chair as if glad of its support. A strange bluish pallor crept over him, and if Maris had noted, she would have seen him bite and twist his lips as if to keep back a cry of physical pain. He pressed one hand tightly against his left side.

But Maris did not see. When her hands fell, she was staring out into a black whirl of nothingness. Her lips moved, and, after an instant, came the disjointed sounds: "That woman! At last! Here in my own home!" Suddenly she bent far down to him. "Does she know who *I* am?"

"I think not. She was in haste, and I could not ask. She seemed greatly frightened at seeing me."

Maris could not hold herself together for courteous listening. One eager question pushed another from her lips. "You are sure it was my servant? You spoke her name?"

"Yes, and after her first cry of fear, she pretended to laugh at my mistake."

"She denied it?"

"Yes, — but that makes no difference. It was Jane."

Again Maris fixed wide eyes upon darkness. "Jane, — still a fugitive, — still fearing to be recognized. Yes, it was Jane." Now she came back to the moment's stress. "How could you fail to question her? You should have forced some answer from her. Perhaps the chance is gone forever —"

It was now the old man's turn to interrupt. This sluggish, saturnine advance toward its victim of an inevitable agony was becoming unendurable. Something must be done to hasten it.

"Don't you understand," he cried almost querulously, "that she was on an errand, — an urgent

errand, seeking for a doctor? Before I had seen her face, I told her to come here for Dr. Page."

Surely, from this, the unhappy woman before him must begin to realize the horror. Still she asked questions.

"Yes, I recall that now. And she was a mill woman, she said, — working in my husband's mill? Ah!" The last exclamation had the effect of a check-rein. In the new silence Dr. Singleterry repeated, clearly: "Yes, she is a mill woman at the Regina."

Maris grew very quiet all at once. The old man held his breath. Maris' next words were whispered from very far away. "She said a child was hurt."

"Yes," said the minister. It was all that he could utter. The flesh crawled on his bones. He cowered, waiting.

"She said it was her child, — crushed in the mill. Why! She had no child!"

"No," answered the old man as well as he could for the chattering of his teeth. "She had no child."

"Then whose, — whose child is that, — torn into pieces in my husband's mill?" Her full voice was now upon him, and its edge was keen. He felt it draw across his heart. "Why don't you answer? Why do you blink like that? *Whose* child, I say?" Her fierce grasp was on his shoulder. She pulled him this way and that in the first frenzy of her grief. "Look at me; tell me whether it is Maris that is speaking. Do you know what I am saying? Is this stake and the flames about it, — real?"

"God help us all!" cried out the minister with a sob, and let his head fall over to the table.

Again Maris was quite still; then a strange sound slid into the silence. It was the low laughter of a woman. "How greatly pleased the Devil must be," she said. Next came a rush of silken skirts.

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He sprang up and caught her at the door, his hand closing over the icy fingers that clutched the knob.

"Keep your head, Maris. Do nothing reckless now. You will be sorry."

"Take your hand off," she cried; "I'm going!"

For answer his long, white fingers turned to steel. "I am not thinking only of you, Maris," he went on, a little sternly. "There are others, less culpable, to whom a false move on your part, just now, may bring unnecessary tragedy. What of your husband? Ah, — here's the first thought for him! Well, is it not best to make your agony reflect as little as possible on him? Such a man cares for his dignity, — for appearances, — it is right that he should. A premature disclosure may do irrevocable harm there, as well as to the child."

"The child, — too?" breathed Maris. "How can that be?"

"Why, in more ways than one," he went on, gently; and all the time that he was speaking, he led her back from the door. Now that a suffering fellow-creature depended upon him for guidance, his thought worked swift and sure. "For one thing, we cannot be certain until we see her that it is your Felicia. Jane is now living as the wife of another man, — called, — dear me, — she spoke the name quite clearly, but my memory for names is as bad as my memory for faces is good —"

"Was it — Winch?" asked Maris, unexpectedly.

"Precisely. How could you know?"

"I had a bloated thing called 'Winch' once pointed out to me. But he is of no importance. You were saying that we could not be sure, — because —?"

"Because this man Winch, when Jane joined her sinful life to his, might already have been the father of a child about Felicia's age. Don't you see that?"

Or they may have adopted a child, — such things are done, — just to work in the mill and help support them. For either of these two reasons the child may not be yours."

Maris was listening closely. She shivered now, and put her hand up to her throat. "Oh," she moaned, "I don't know which would be more terrible, — to find it to be Felicia, — or not!"

"Whichever way God will, our present policy is caution."

"I can't endure it! I *won't* stay here like a chained thing and let the minutes flay me inch by inch," she cried out suddenly, trying to tear her hand from his.

"You *must* stay. You *must* endure," he said, detaining her with a force that hurt. "You have brought about this state of things by your own deeds. Don't be a poltroon, now that the first reckoning has come. Your father was as brave a man as ever fought in a brave cause. He used to speak of you to me as his little thoroughbred. Don't further disgrace his memory now!"

She trembled and cringed at his words, as if they had been lashes, but the pain helped to steady her. "What is there for me to do, then?" she cried.

"That hardest of all things, — nothing," said the other. "You must wait here until the doctor returns with his report of the case. If you should try to follow him to the house, you might be the ruin of everything, including the child's hope of recovery. You must try to be a brave woman; you must face the inevitable, and force yourself to hide, for a few more hours, — or days, — your miserable secret. This is only a beginning. The whole crisis must come now. Poor soul, — poor, weak, self deluded soul!"

"To sit here! To do nothing, — nothing, — noth-

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ing — " she repeated, and her words pronounced it would seem, her own death-sentence.

" There is no move for you, — or for me, — until we find out, beyond a doubt, whether that child is yours."

" But how is that to be done? Neither Dr. Page nor Ruth could tell me, even if they knew what we suspect. They have not seen her."

" And I fear, too, I should not know the little one. Perhaps, if the family resemblance were quite unmistakable — "

She broke in with the bitter laugh he dreaded. " And there is not much left of family resemblance in mill children," she said. " They all look alike, as starved cats look alike, — wan bloodless images of children grown old before youth really comes to them. Will I ever — ever forget that hideous death-dance before my gate? "

" Try not to think of that, or of any such torturing phantasmagoria," he pleaded tenderly. " Can you not, at a time like this, unburden your heart to the Man of Sorrows? "

She sank down in a chair just behind her, and gave a sort of moaning cry, but, when she was seated, began to shake her head from side to side. " Even though you have forgotten and discarded Him," the minister went on in his beautiful caressing voice, " He waits to strengthen and to comfort you."

Maris leaned far over, and put a hand up to her face. To his infinite relief, he saw that she was crying. " My poor, poor girl. My little Maris," he whispered, and laid a hand light as a moonbeam for an instant on her dark hair. " I go now, thankfully, leaving you in the hands of God."

But Maris startled him anew. Flinging her head upright so that the healing drops were scattered, she

cried out: "I think not. You are leaving me prey to the devil, and all his angels."

"Then I shall not leave," he said instantly. "Such wild blasphemy must come from a disordered mind."

"As you please," she said, shrugging. She leaned back, drumming on the arm of a chair with nervous fingers. The old man did not sit down, he stood near, watching her with much the same look that he had turned on the mill children in their unspeakable dance.

Maris kept up her defiant attitude as best she could. She did not look upward, and made an elaborate pretence of ignorance that he was near. The day seemed to be standing still in the pleasant, shadowed library. Outside the sun scraped softly on the closed eastern blind. It was not yet eleven o'clock, and already a year had been lived in this one day.

Now Maris changed the rhythm she was strumming on the chair-arm. Slower and slower it grew, until it ceased altogether, and the hand fell heavily downward. She glanced up furtively, and saw the old man's eyes set on her. For a long moment they stared thus each at the other, and Maris saw his lips tremble into the motions of a prayer. All at once her piteous defence went down. The straining sobs rose, choking into her throat, her eyes filled and overflowed with tears.

"Now go, — go at once," she whispered. "After all, there are a few things I can say to God."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARIS UNDERSTANDS

ELEVEN o'clock came; half after eleven, — twelve, — one, — and yet no sign of the big motor-car crawling down Red Horse Hill.

Dwight Alden drove back to luncheon in the buggy. Maris, meeting him in the hallway, asked very quietly: "What is the latest news from the child?"

As quietly he answered: "Page and Ruth are still hard at work. It seems that the regular mill doctor, for whom the hands are taxed, is off on a fishing excursion. A piece of inconceivable carelessness, too. I am not particularly pleased with McGhee in this matter, I can tell you."

"Just how did the accident take place?"

"Don't ask me questions, dear," the man said wearily, laying his arm about her shoulders. "It is a wretched business and has quite knocked me up. It can do neither of us good to repeat harrowing details."

"You do look pale and troubled," said Maris. "Come right in to your luncheon. We won't wait for the others."

"No; Ruth sent word not to wait," said Alden, following her into the dining-room.

"Is Ruth gentle and sympathetic, as well as very, very clever in such things?" Maris ventured to ask, when the luncheon was in progress.

"What things?" inquired her husband, frowning above the intricacies of a broiled squab.

"The sort of things you do for a child who has been badly hurt."

"I don't know about the sympathy. Probably from your standpoint she would be hard as nails. But she knows her business all right, you may be sure. She took a summer course somewhere in just the sort of case, — emergency, bones smashed and all that."

"Oh, I wish I were smart, and self-controlled, and good, like your sister Ruth!" Maris said passionately.

"And I don't want you changed a hair's breadth from what you are," declared Dwight. "Doesn't that mean something? Now eat your lunch, — there isn't a morsel on your plate yet, — and we'll try to talk of pleasanter things."

Obediently Maris placed some food on her plate, and tried to eat.

"There was great news in the morning's paper," said Dwight, who was already beginning to feel the effects of the good food. "The Knickerbocker Trust Company is to resume business on the twenty-sixth."

"Really? How nice!" said Maris, smiling toward him.

What could Ruth and the doctor be doing through all these hours? Surely even a bad fracture and many wounds would not need so long a time for the preliminary dressing. There must be something else, some more horrible thing to detain them.

"No other thing could do quite so much toward reviving national confidence and credit," Dwight went on. "It is a big thing for all of us, my dear, that the Knickerbocker has weathered her financial storm so bravely."

"I certainly am glad," answered Maris. "That

ladies' room of theirs was so pretty and so comfortable. I never saw such cunning goldfish."

It was a child called "Winch," and if the very one Maris had seen driven down the hill, what a misfortune that the dust and glare of the road had so obscured clear vision. It was crying, too, crying aloud in terror, its poor face all distorted. She had not even seen the color of the eyes. As to the height and probable age, they were very near what Felicia's would have been.

"On reading the big head-lines, I sent off some telegrams of congratulation at once, — one, collectively to the Board of Directors, and a few more personal ones to the fellows I happen to know. There will be a great old jubilee in the village of Manhattan this night!" He sighed, wishing that he were to be there.

"It was thoughtful of you, dearest," smiled his wife. "But then you always do just the right thing."

Yes, in height the child might well be Felicia. The hair had a darkish look, under its powdering of dust and lint. There was a hint of grace in the swift, scrawny figure. All the women of Maris' family had been graceful. If only she had seen the eyes!

"Guess there have been a jolly lot of motor-cars laid up for the winter in Knickerbocker garages," laughed Dwight, with a hint of malice. "Well, it won't hurt the old boys to economize a little. By George, what coffee this is! I never knew coffee, until I numbered Aunt Mandy among my friends."

"It is delicious," assented Maris, sipping hers. "She uses some old-fashioned kind of a garage to boil it in."

After all, there was no one but herself who could be sure. She must find out. Anything was better than this torturing uncertainty. If she went, by

night, wearing a veil, Jane Rumbough might not recognize her. Her manner of speaking was undoubtedly changed. She used more of the crisp pronunciation of the North. By exaggerating this accent and pitching her voice in a higher key, Jane would be deceived. Only to get there. Only to put her hand out, — in the dark, if needs be, and touch the little body. Then she would know!

Dwight glanced at her searchingly, then rose from the table. "Well, I must get back. Things are pretty well disorganized at the mill, but I can face it now, after this bit of rest, and a good lunch."

Maris was following him to the door for her usual good-by embrace. Just at the parting he turned to her. His face was very sweet, with a queer look of shyness. "I am going to send over fifty dollars to the cottage where the poor little kid lives. Wouldn't you like it to go in your name?"

Maris' upturned face flashed into beauty, and then, as quickly, clouded. She hung her head under the weight of her shame. "No," came the low answer. "Don't send it at all." Before he could voice his astonishment, she had run back into the house.

From a library window Maris watched her husband drive down the hill, and turn into the curving of the valley. A red motor-car, coming the other way, now passed him, the two vehicles slackening speed for a rapid exchange of words.

In the motor-car sat Ruth alone. Maris was not sure, for the moment, whether it was relief or disappointment that she felt. Then came the thought that Ruth was as clear-headed and scientific as any doctor, and in this particular crisis a much less dangerous person to question.

Maris went out to meet her as she had met Dwight, and led her into the dining-room, restraining her

corroding impatience until the favorable opportunity came. Her first words concerned Dr. Page.

"Simply worn out," said Ruth. "And rather messy, you know, after three hours of it."

"Of course, I should have thought of that," cried Maris, controlling her desire to shudder. "He would want to go to the hotel. And I won't question you about the accident, Ruth, until you have finished lunch. I've told Aunt Mandy to make you a fresh, new pot of coffee."

"Oh, I have no feminine qualms on such subjects," said Ruth. "I had to get over those long ago." But in spite of these careless words, it was noticeable that she did not pursue the topic.

"You look so tired and pale, Ruth. Let me take off your hat for you. Please —" as Ruth looked amused. "I want to do something for somebody, — so very much."

"If it will relieve your feelings, do it by all means," said Ruth.

As though the greatest of privileges had been conferred, Maris went around to the other side of the table, removed the long pins, lifted the sailor hat as if it had been a sacred vessel, and then, more timidly, smoothed the pretty, soft hair that showed a thread of dampness where the crown had pressed.

"You must have kept this on the whole time," said Maris. "Your hair has a shining ring, as if a little gold wire were on it."

"You may be sure I had no time to think of hats," said Ruth. It was queer how this absurd sister-in-law crept close to one's weak places! "Besides, there would have been no clean spot where I could put it down. Such a kennel of a house. It was all I could do to drum up a tin wash-basin and some water, before I left,"

Maris had reseated herself across from Ruth. In a sort of fascination she watched each motion and expression of her companion. Now it was Ruth's calm face on which she gazed, but more often the hands. What fine, strong, unringed hands they were, — so full of character and power. And all these hours they had been busied with a suffering child, — with Winch's and Jane Rumbough's child.

Ruth looked up. "An odd thing happened just as I was about to leave." Maris gave a little restless move, eloquent of interest. "The anæmic old Episcopal clergyman, Dr. Singleterry —"

"Oh," breathed Maris, interrupting, "So he went —"

"Rather he tried to," corrected Ruth, "for he had hardly reached the top step when that frightful woman, Mrs. Winch, caught sight of him and flew out like a hyena, literally driving him away with blows and curses. I could not help wondering whether her attitude was indicative of the average position of the mill people toward religion, or whether she has some personal hatred. From her intense violence, one would have surmised the latter."

"O, she must have grown into a terrible woman," said Maris.

"Why, you silly thing! You are shivering at the very thought of her," cried Ruth. "I fancy she's no worse than the majority. What can we expect, while such conditions are allowed to exist?"

Ruth was rising. She glanced out toward the hallway and the marble steps. "Don't go up just this minute," pleaded Maris. "You haven't told me a word yet about the little girl."

"Are you really so much interested?" asked Ruth a little curiously. "I have heard you counsel a policy

of non-interference between laboring children and their parents."

"A case like this is different!" cried the other. "It is an awful, a hideous accident, that happened in Dwight's mill. I can think of nothing but that little child. I want to hear everything that you will tell me." The interest, also the suffering, in the speaker's eyes were unmistakable.

Ruth gazed upon her thoughtfully. It was one of the disconcerting things about Ruth, this way of hers to pause, at the height of an emotional crisis, and begin a deliberate study of her companion. With little thought for the nervous tension of the other woman, she was now wondering whether, after all, Maris was as superficial as she had always seemed. This was no mere surface compassion that had changed a face from its usual piquant brightness, into a set white mask of pity. Perhaps Maris was one of those beings who shrink from giving sympathy because they must always give too much. Ruth had heard of such cases, and, if the truth must be told, had despised a little the weaklings who were lacking a proper self-control. Maris had been, apparently, more than indifferent in the past to the questions of betterment of conditions among the mill-people. It would seem now as if this accident had aroused in her, all at once, a passionate sense of human responsibility. Ruth hoped that this was true. In any event, it was far from her intention or desire to check the growth of so admirable a sentiment in her brother's wife.

Suddenly she spoke, throwing her head back with a bright, decided gesture. "Then come up to my room with me, will you? Though I must warn you beforehand, it is a distressing affair."

Maris went up the stairway just after Ruth. Step

after step she followed, in unconscious imitation of the stronger woman. Had there been time to analyze her emotions, she would have wondered at her feeling of dependence. She could have reached out, now, and caught at the smooth gray skirt, as a child clings to the nearest person in a dark room. Ruth seemed, in these hours, the one thing in the world she need not fear.

"Here we are!" said Ruth brightly, flinging open the door, and waiting for Maris to pass in. "You tuck yourself away in that com'fy chair by the window, while I get this stiff collar off. You will wish to hear first, of course, how the accident occurred."

"Yes," said Maris meekly, though in reality it had not been in her thought.

"It was unnecessary, as most accidents are," began Ruth severely. "The result of a double negligence. In the first place, it seems, the poor child has been whipped back to the mill, day after day, when in reality she was too sick to stand. There isn't enough red blood left in its poor wasted body, to supply a healthy sparrow."

"Yes, — and the second negligence —"

"The second is what more nearly affects my brother. A piece of machinery, — one of the lesser bands that come up through the flooring of all the stories in order to turn individual machines, — had been left uncovered. The law, even in this community —" here Ruth cast down her collar on the dresser, and sniffed aloud, to show her small opinion of the community, "requires that such swift-moving bands should be always kept protected by wooden casings."

"Why, of course. Even I can see how necessary that would be," returned Maris. She was beginning

to feel quite proud of her own reserve. Here she was questioning Ruth as about any stranger child.

"So does McGhee," said Ruth, indignantly, and began loosening her hair. "And there is a tradition that once this spool-room band, like the others, had a surrounding box, but it became injured, in some way, was taken down, and has never been replaced. I presume that Mr. McGhee kept putting it off."

"Then it was on that band the little girl was hurt?"

"Yes. Being already too ill, as I have said, to keep steadily on her feet, she stumbled against it, fell, and in an instant was dragged down to the floor, her left arm between the band and the jagged board edges of the flooring."

"Oh, — it must have been terrible pain. I can feel it — here, — in my arm." Maris' head went back to the chair, her voice faded as light fades. "Camphor, — Ruth, — have you any camphor —"

Ruth turned, caught sight of her face, and rushed to the chair. "Here, Maris, Maris! Don't give way to the faintness. Fight it. I'll get the camphor. Sit up straight until I bring it!" In a moment more, the threat had passed. Ruth shook her a little angrily. "How is one to treat you like a rational being, if you go off like that, at the first hint of suffering?"

"It was only for the instant. You saw how quickly I overcame it. Don't stop telling me about it. I must hear, — I tell you, I must hear. I *must*." She was wringing her hands.

Ruth drew back in some astonishment. "Are you specially interested in the child or her people?" she asked.

This question did more than the camphor to complete Maris' restoration.

"No, — no, it isn't that. Only, you see, dear

Ruth, I'm just beginning to realize the truth of things, — all the misery that other people endure, — and my own wretched cowardice. I want to be brave and strong, like you. I'm going to try hard, if you'll help me. Now, go on — tell me exactly, everything. Don't — don't move the camphor bottle, though."

Ruth cast a pitying yet almost affectionate glance at her sister-in-law. She really did not approve of Maris, or wish to become fond of her, but her clear judgment had, more than once of late, pointed out the possibility.

"Well, of course," she began, "the arm was mangled, burned by the friction, and literally crushed to a pulp. The two bones of the forearm are shattered. The arm hung like a fold of bleeding cloth." The speaker was watching, keenly, the effect of these words.

"Keep on," said Maris. "I'm not faint again."

"At first Dr. Page insisted upon amputation."

"Yes, — I know what that — is."

"But I prevented it."

"You! O, Ruth, Ruth! Of course any woman would realize more than a man the horror of that. Don't look at me so strangely. I'm strong, I tell you."

"We had quite an argument over the poor little soul," Ruth went on, her own face more pitying than she knew. "The mother was with Dr. Page. She wished the amputation because, she said the child would get well sooner, and could get back to work in the mills. Inhuman fiends, — those parents are!"

"But he didn't! You had your way?" Maris fought to keep back the rising excitement.

"Yes, I had my way. It is a greater menace to the patient's life; but as I looked at the ill-fed child, its hag of a mother, and the bloated wretch who,

presumably is its father, I couldn't help thinking that life is not so great a gift to it, that we need put life first."

"So I should have thought, — so I think, now," whispered Maris.

"So finally Dr. Page attempted a somewhat new and very difficult operation."

"Tell me of that, — too."

A little hint of amusement crept into Ruth's eyes.

"You wouldn't know when I had told you," she said.

"Yet, — because I ask it —"

"He used what is called 'intra-canalicular splints,' one to each bone. They are tubes of aluminum inserted through the centre of the crushed bone, to give them shape and strength while they are knitting. Afterward another operation is necessary to extract the splints, — but that has no special danger."

"What wonderful — wonderful things wise people can do now!" said Maris, in a tone of awe. "It is almost like the old days of miracles."

"Even with this skill, the child has no more than a chance of life," said Ruth sadly. "Her greatest menace is blood-poisoning. We do not see how it can be avoided in that filthy hovel where she lies."

Maris could sit still no longer. "But surely, in all this town, there is some cleaner place where she can go."

"We have inquired and can find none. Besides, these mill people are resentful of every effort to better them. The chances are they would not let her leave. Recall how they treated the minister."

"But she mustn't be allowed to lie there and die from neglect," cried the other, beginning to walk up and down. "I'm sure that Dwight —" She paused, bit her lips, and checked the words she wished to speak. "At least, dear Ruth, you and the doctor are going again."

"Yes, at four this afternoon. He is coming by for me, — and as often, within the next few critical days, as those dreadful parents of hers will allow. The man is a vagrant, I understand. He lives, — and gets drunk, on the mill wages of the woman and her child."

"O, something must be done. *Something* must be done," Maris was saying over and over to herself. Then she walked back to Ruth.

"While you were there, did you happen to hear them call the little girl by name?"

Ruth was brushing her hair. She held the brush suspended. "Yes, several times. It was an unusual sort of a nickname. 'Lisshy,' I believe. Yes, I am quite sure it was 'Lisshy.'"

Maris stood motionless. The other, busied with soft brown tresses, noted no difference.

"Since you are so genuinely interested, suppose you go back with us this afternoon," the girl was saying. She threw her hair back, expecting a bright look of acceptance, but met averted eyes and a down-cast face. "Ah," she said drily, "I perceive I have jumped too quickly at conclusions."

"Yes, that is true, but not as you mean it," said Maris. "Before long you will understand. I'll go now. I thank you, Ruth, for what you have told me. Very soon, now, you'll understand."

She went from the room swiftly, with no swerve or hesitation to her step, leaving Ruth both puzzled and annoyed. "What is it about her," murmured the girl to her own reflected image, "that so eludes a logical mind? It is like trying to catch a moth."

Ruth made her second visit and returned, this time accompanied by Dr. Page. Always a little shy of using Maris' name to him, she had not mentioned the

unexpected interest in the case shown by her brother's wife. Maris, when they now entered, asked few more questions, but listened, silent and intent, to all their words. It seemed that the man Winch and his wife had refused to let Ruth sit up with the child that night, or supply a nurse for the purpose. The reason given was that they "didn't keer fer strangers roamin' over their house at night." Ruth had pleaded that, at least, the child should sleep alone, and the window near her bed be kept open. They had agreed to the first request, but demurred at the second, as "Mr. Winch was powerful likely to get 'riggers' if any night air was let into the house."

"I can't see any hope for the little creature in that foul air," Ruth had stated.

When Dwight came in they saw, by his still clouded face, that he didn't wish the accident discussed.

Immediately after dinner, Maris excused herself and went to her room. In a very few moments Poline was rung for and sent down with a request to Mr. Alden to "step up-stairs."

Dwight found his wife already in her dressing-gown. She had sent for him to confess that one of her miserable nervous headaches was coming on rapidly, and she thought it better to sleep on the couch in her little dressing-room.

"You know," she said, "if I can really get to sleep, it may pass off. I've told Poline not to disturb me, and I want to beg you not even to knock at the door, when you come up to bed. I must lie perfectly quiet."

"Why, certainly," said Dwight, taking her very gently in his arms. "If you'll promise to call me if the pain gets worse."

"Yes, — I'll promise, — if the pain gets worse," she answered, staring up at him as though she had not seen him for a month.

"How big and dark your eyes are, Maris. I'm afraid this is no ordinary headache."

"I'm not going to be ill," she told him. "I haven't time. Just let me be quiet."

He stooped for a last embrace, when she threw her arms upward, clasping him with so tense and passionate a force that again his fears were stirred. "What is the matter, darling?" he pleaded. "Are you making yourself sick over that injured child?"

"You must not trouble about her, — or me," said Maris. "O, Dwight, I am glad you are the kind of man you are, — brave, sensible, a little cold, — not carried away by feeling as I am. Yes, yes, I know you love me," she hurried on, putting a small hand across his lips to check a threatened interruption. "Your love is fine and true, better than any I can give, and yet you will never touch the ecstasies, — the depths, — that this weak, foolish Maris of yours has touched. Won't you always remember this, — that to the last fibre of my body, — the last throb of my woman's heart, I have loved you, — do love you, — and must always love. I'm not speaking this lightly. I know what I mean better than you realize. Don't let anything make you believe that, in my poor way, I have not truly loved and will not always adore you, — my husband, — my dear, dear husband."

"How you shiver, poor darling! Your hands are growing cold again. Yes, I see you must be quiet. Lie here, sweetheart. Remember, too, that I am loving you, and longing for you to be your own bright self again."

She took his farewell kiss in silence, without response. But, long after he had left she lay motionless, her eyes closed, reliving the pressure of his lips.

CHAPTER NINE

NIGHT UPON RED HORSE HILL

FROM the tense stillness of her room Maris could hear various sounds of life that came, now from the servants' quarters in the rear, now from the main body of the house, down-stairs, where Alden, Ruth and Dr. Page were talking, and, again from the street where, at infrequent intervals, a wagon or a buggy passed, or, on the cemented pavement, the faint patter of human feet.

One by one these sounds diminished. The Alden home was at some distance from the "city," in the district bravely called "The Residential Quarter." As yet the more imposing mansions were few in number and quite far apart, though the building of them went steadily on. Twilight comes quickly in the Southern States, so that the evenings, especially in the suburbs, fallen suddenly, assert their presence with something of defiance. No one could deny the evening loneliness of aristocratic Sidon. By eight o'clock Dr. Page had gone. The servants' quarters were as dark and still as midnight. Aunt Mandy had doubtless crept up into her huge four-poster bed, a relic bequeathed from the golden days of the Virginia Blakes; but Archer and Poline were most probably lending the grace of their double presence to a function of "The Colored Ladies and Gents' Roosevelt Social Circle of Sidon." The negro

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loves alliteration as he does music. These names were sweet morsels under the tongue.

Ruth and her brother were still down-stairs talking, or perhaps, writing letters. Maris listened intently, but could hear no sound of voices. She rose softly from the couch, and looked about the little chamber. An electric arc-light, suspended from tall poles in the centre of the narrow side street, shone in through the one window, giving her what light she needed. She went to her dresser, and had begun to open the topmost drawer, when, moved by a new thought, she turned and, hurrying to the window, stood staring out. This faced the east. The blue glare and uncertain flicker of the great lamp blinded her. She put up her hand to interpose, but finding that too small, caught up a magazine for screening. Over the top of this she could see that the sky was a dull, grape blue, powdered thickly with yellow stars. When more accustomed to the darkness, she discerned the cloud-like bulk of Red Horse Hill, and its bristling mane of trees. The stars were clear above it. Two weeks ago she could have seen on such a night, through scantily leaved boughs, great flashes and gleams of the larger stars, like fireflies in a web, but now the foliage was too dense. There was only the continuous, undulating line of trees, broken at times by the flat crest of a soaring pine.

Turning from the window, she began to strip off, feverishly, her silken garments, hanging them far back in the closet. There was one hook near the door from which a very different outfit already depended, a short walking skirt of gray, a flannel shirt-waist, and a jacket which, though of good material, was unpretentious and had always been too large for her. A small hat was now deliberately denuded of its flowers and feathers, to be wrapped in a long, green

automobile veil. She returned, next, to the dressing-table, opened the drawer, took out her pocketbook, and, after some thought, extracted a ten dollar bill only, which she put deep down in her jacket pocket. The plainest of her handkerchiefs, a pair of driving gloves already soiled and a pair of rubber overshoes completed her attire. Finding herself indeed ready for her first step in the dark, she gave a little gasp, and her courage faltered.

She went again to the window, as if for strength, staring upward at the great hill, and thinking of what lay beyond. The vision of that perfect morning when she and Dwight had driven through its crowning strip of wood, rushed to her eyes in tears. How sweet had been the odor of the green shade. How the brisk violets had watched them! "They will hide their faces when I pass, to-night," she murmured.

But this was no time for sentiment or reminiscence. There was something to be done. First, a cautious descent down the back stairway to the servants' court, then safe exit through the gate at the rear of the lot. This led, directly, into a little back alley, guiltless, as yet, of grading or of drains, and used chiefly for the heavy teams that brought coal, ice, wood, and building materials.

She shut the door of her dressing room very softly and went out. One step after another she took, descending, and paused at each to listen. The new woodwork gave forth, at unexpected moments, small fierce squeaks of protest; and at each Maris' heart beat to suffocation, so that she must pause before venturing on the next lower step. At one such intermission a series of most alarming sounds came from Aunt Mandy's room. Maris clung to the railing. An instant later she was smiling to recognize the old cook's peaceful, if stentorian snores.

But now, surely, some one was walking in the house. The big back door to the main hallway still stood wide, and down this hall Mr. Alden moved. Here was real danger. In her present position the hall light fell all too plainly on her crouching figure. She did not dare to move; but if her husband came, even to the threshold of the door, she must inevitably be seen. She shut her eyes and drew herself down as far as she dared. Every instant she expected to hear his voice. But instead came a blessed sensation of deepening darkness. He was turning off the house lights. Now she need not tremble, even when he walked boldly to the door, shut the two panels, and bolted them from within. He did not see her, even when she stretched her arms to him and spoke his name.

For caution's sake she remained as she was a few moments longer. Aunt Mandy's snores shook the window-panes. Now was the time to hurry across the red clay of the unfinished court, and find the gate which she knew must open into the alley. Such narrow red mud lanes seem, in the South, never to become dry. At her first step the viscid clay caught at her overshoe and dragged it off. She rescued and readjusted it, only to have the second shoe taken at the next step. For a few yards she floundered, stopping constantly, then seeing that, at this rate, her destined journey would take most of the night, deliberately flung the shoes, as far as her strength would permit, over into the nearest unbuilt field.

Now she made better progress, though still the clay wrapped her feet in its chilling layers, and soon reduced her dainty boots to wet glove-kid. She needed to stop now and again to scrape off the accumulated masses, but, aside from this impediment, her journey was swift and sure.

She passed no one, not even a policeman. If Sidon boasted a police force at all, it evidently preferred the blazing windows of hotel, shop or barroom to these half-deserted precincts of the rich. Down into the valley to the east and along the left fork of the road that led up Red Horse Hill she hurried. There was an easier and a shorter foot-path around the base of the hill to the right, following the line of car tracks and trestlework to the Regina mill and its Red Village, but Maris had never heard of this. She knew only the long and curving road upon which Peggy had drawn her, a certain spring morning, centuries ago, when the way had not seemed long.

By this time she was half-way up the slope. Her shoes were so wet and her feet so chilled that now she stooped and put an ungloved hand on them, to convince herself that any shoes remained. Her skirt was weighted about the edge with nuggets of dried mud. Some of these had grown so large and heavy by accretion that they dropped from her by their own weight. She slipped the glove on again, and gazed upward. Directly over her head the black mane seemed to rise. By leaning far backward, and gazing as one stares at a "skied" effort in a picture-gallery, she could see the dark cloud-like border cutting across the girth of starry Orion. To the south, glittering Scorpio swung complete, an outline of perfect jewelry. It came over her all at once how much more beautiful and human were these stars than those cold, Northern ones she used to watch through the street-canyons of New York. So much of the South was exquisite, so steeped in memories of a happy childhood, that it had seemed to her, by reflex, as if all Southern children must be happy ones. The "grown-folks" in her childhood's south were kind, — perhaps too kind. Flowers grew there, not only in the city gardens but

planted wide on the hills for every child to gather. Scaly-barks, walnuts and chinquapin abounded, and sometimes one encountered the marvel of a wild plum-tree in fruit, or a ripe may-pop, puckered with sweetness. To think of her South as now she was being forced to think of it, as a place where many, many children of pure blood were being starved, over-worked and maltreated, where one child lay even now in jeopardy of death, because of cruelty, was a sensation so fearful, so incredible, that the stars dimmed before her eyes, and she cried out, in the darkness, "Let the dream pass. It must be an evil dream from which I'll soon be waking."

But there was something to be done. She staggered on, climbing the slippery height, and soon reached the strip of wood. By contrast with its blackness, the hill outside was a lighted street. At first she could not see the winding road, but she knew she was upon it by the soft crumbling touch under her stiffening feet. A childish and instinctive fear of wild beasts assailed her. For an instant she stood still, trembling. The woods grew full of small, mysterious sounds. She listened, fearfully, with clasped hands, then all at once gave a low laugh of bitterness at the farce of it. Why should she be afraid? What serpent knew so deadly a lymph as that in her own miserable heart? What mountain beast had claws so fierce as those lean fingers of the Furies, clutching already at her hair?

She went on swiftly, keeping to the road more by the quality of the sand underfoot than by any sense of vision. It was a relief to walk, once more, upon a comparative level, and to feel the clogged edges of her skirt being set free through powdering dust.

When she came out to the further verge of the forest, the stars in the wide, purple sky were a myriad

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lamps upheld that she might see. The small houses of the mill village had, under this dim light, the look of solid blocks set by some giant child at play about the surface of a sand heap. The incipient gullies, and the deepening roadways in the clay were not visible.

Down in the valley, beyond and below the rows of blocks, sat the great parent block, the Mill. In more than one of the basement windows the flicker of a light was seen, marking the passage of a night watchman. There were times when the great factory never rested, when a "night shift" of hands came on at sunset to relieve the regular laborers of the day; but, at present, because of recent financial conditions in the North, the night shift was not needed.

Peering down eagerly into the village, Maris could see but a single light, set in a cottage window facing her, about half-way down the slope. She had no doubt as to the location, and hurried on. Drawing nearer, she saw that it was not a candle, but a small, cheap kerosene lamp, and that the window through which it shone was tightly closed, though the wooden shutters were left back against the wall.

Although both mill and village were thus in comparative darkness, there was one spot in the valley where light blazed forth. No barroom or theatre front in a great city was more prodigal of electricity than the Regina's "store," with its indispensable saloon.

The institution known roughly as "the store" is, to the successful running of a Southern cotton-mill, quite as necessary as the machinery or the "hands." It is always the sole property of the mill, the wages of whose employees, due twice in a month, are paid, not in money, but in tickets or coupons, negotiable only at the mill store. The percentages charged on

bare necessities of life, — bacon, lard, flour and hominy, — to laborers already underpaid, adds enormously to the general mill profits. Like their parents or masters, the children's wages are paid in store-coupons, and these are given to the elders to spend as they see fit. The little slaves, whose work is seldom less than full twelve hours a day, and who are often more skilled than the adult standing next them, receive half pay, ostensibly because of their youth. In return for the very essence of the immature lives, they receive insufficient and unhealthy food, a vermin-ridden bunch of rags to sleep on, and a covering for nakedness scarcely to be dignified by the name of dress. Statistics such as these had filled the echoes at the Brattle house since Ruth's arrival. They came rushing back to Maris' memory now, and set her to stumbling on the steep path.

After a few more silent, hurrying moments of descent, she had reached the hovel and paused directly under the window which had held her beacon light. The thin board walls of the house came near to the earth on this upward side. She could have looked into the sick-room had she dared. The light, streaming upward from the distant store, made a clear rectangle of black shadow. In this she hid, pressing her cheek and ear against the house, and listening intently.

At first there was no distinct sound, though the silence was itself pregnant with restlessness. Something like a moan came, only to be stilled. Now, distinctly, she heard the voice of a child, saying over and over the one word, "water." No one came to her, though a gruff sort of answer might be heard from a more distant part of the room. Now the feeble voice was raised. "Kaint I hev jes' *one* more swaller? My throat's killin' me."

The gruff sound came again, more audibly, and was followed by heavy, shambling footsteps on the floor. These, Maris guessed, belonged to Winch, and she blessed the man softly because he was bringing the sick child what she craved.

But this was evidently not his motive. He went to the front door and opened it, and was passing out, still mumbling, when the shrill, nasal tones of a third person cried to him, "An' now whar you think you're goin'?"

"What's that to you? I'm goin'."

"Down to that cursed store agin, — drinkin' up what me an' Lisshy makes."

"Well, an' what uv it!" repeated the man in a hoarse, thickened voice. "I'm goin', an' that's all erbout it. I can't git no sleep with that kid nickerin' like er sick colt. Haven't closed my eyes."

"You kin sleep all day while I'm workin'," retorted the woman. "Wouldn't hurt you to give her a dipper uv water onst in a while an' let me git my rest. I'm jes erbout wore to a frazzle between you an' her."

The man's reply to this was a curse, and a bang of the door that made the frail house shiver. The woman rose hurriedly and went after him, reopening the door. She did not speak to him again, but stood in the entrance watching him with a resentment and disgust so powerful that Maris could feel it where she hid. The woman's voice had, all along, been unmistakable. It was Jane Rumbough's beyond doubt, though sharpened, fretted and grown more nasal with the hardness and poverty of her life. Maris could almost pity her that, after having lost the man for whom she had given up honor, decency, and everything that makes life worth while to a good woman, she should have chosen a second mate so much lower

and more degraded. She watched, too, as through Jane Rumbough's eyes, the lurching figure as it took precarious passage down the slope. Not only a drunkard, but unmistakably a diseased and useless wreck. Now he was silhouetted clear against the saloon lights, a shapeless, bull-like outline, eloquent of infirmity.

The woman in the doorway turned, and was slowly drawing the panel to a close. This was the opportunity. Maris came out into the light, her veil about her face, and in her most Northern accent, said: "One moment, if you please."

"Mercy! Who's that!" Jane Rumbough cried. Then, seeing she had nothing to fear, added, with a nervous giggle: "You sho' scairt the gizzard outer me that time!"

"Oh, what's happenin', — what's happenin', Mawmer?" screamed the child's voice from within.

"Nothin'. Shet up, you!" said Jane, darting her head in at the door and out again. She regarded Maris now with scrutiny. Her looks were not friendly. "Well, what are you after, prowlin' 'round here this time o' night?"

"I heard your little girl was hurt. I have come to see her," Maris answered.

"You might hev saved yerself the trouble," said the other, insolently, and almost closed the door in her face. "Reckon I know your game. You're one o' them Meddlesome-Matties from up North, — think you kin come down here an' run us, niggers an' all."

"Indeed I am not that kind," said Maris hastily. "I care nothing about colored people or attending to others' affairs. I only feel very sorry for the little girl and — her mother. The doctor told me of the accident."

"O! Then you're down to the hotel," said the

other in a less hostile tone. She knew that travellers were generally prodigal of money; also that a person just passing through a mill town was not so apt to make trouble.

Maris neither affirmed nor denied her last inference. "I know that you must be extremely fatigued," she went on, throwing what pleading she dared into her voice, "and I thought I'd offer to sit by the child's bed for a while, so that you could rest."

"We've already druv off Yankee nurses and doctors fer the night."

"But I am different," said Maris.

"How diffrent? Air ye rich?"

"I will be glad to give you money for the child," said Maris, flushing in the dark.

"And air ye to leave these parts soon?"

"Very soon," said Maris, "and never to come back at all."

"How much money ye got on yer?" was the next question, put with keen, malicious eyes.

"Only ten dollars. But here it is. I will send you more."

This argument was irresistible. Jane snatched at the crisp, green bill, but even when it was safely tucked away in the belt of her nondescript gown, hesitated before admitting the visitor.

"Water. Jes' one swallow," moaned Lisshy. "My throat is burnin' up."

Maris went in before the other could stop her. Jane followed a little sullenly. "Now, none uv yer talk erbout how old she is, — an' how long she's worked in the mill, — an' all that funny business," Jane Rumbough warned.

"No, — no, indeed," murmured Maris, almost overcome, now, by the nearness of her quest. "She must not talk at all with fever. I'll just sit here

quietly, and sometimes give her water. You may be perfectly assured of my good faith."

The room where Lisshy lay was to the left as one entered. A second one opened to the right, and there was a door between. A third door led out to the two strips of board which formed the "back gallery," and which terminated in the closet-like kitchen wing.

The first sensation upon entering was that of wonder at the bareness of the place. No unused garret ever had an aspect less homelike or less human. The air was tainted with the odor of greasy rags, and the cheap fumes of the lamp. This feeble luminary stood on a box near the foot of the bed. A bit of paper, a broken saucer, some medicine and a few other trifles were crowded within its radius, but Maris barely noted them. In the centre of the rags Lisshy lay, the huge cocoon of her wounded arm making a brilliant patch of cleanliness. She still wore the dress in which she had been injured, and her hair had not yet been unbraided, or cleansed of its lint and dust. Even the small pale face had not been washed, so busy had Ruth and the doctor been with the main operation, and so insensible to dirt had the parents of the child become. All these things Maris saw, while trying not to see. She did not wish to seem to scrutinize while Jane was at her elbow. She did not even wish to be certain, as long as Jane breathed in the same air. For this strange sacrament of meeting, only she and Lisshy and God must be near.

"Is that the lady that wants to set by my bed?" asked Lisshy in an awed whisper.

"Yes, dear. If Mrs. Winch will allow it," answered Maris, in her crisp, forced voice. She fancied that the child shrank from the tone. She turned,

a little hesitatingly, to Jane. "May I have a chair, here, — beside her?"

Jane laughed harshly. "Furniture ain't in fashion in de Red Village. We take a notion to move too often. Reckon ye'll hev to set on soap an' cracker boxes like the rest uv us."

"Why, certainly," said Maris, looking about. "A box will do quite well."

She found one and carried it to the bed, choosing the right side where the lamp would be nearly at her back. Jane stood watching her, with scorn and curiosity, but no recognition on her hard, worn face. To her it was but a vagary, — a passing fad of a rich Yankee woman, stirred for the time being by a more than usually poignant exhibition of wretchedness. To those whose very existence means despair these momentary dallings with sorrow seem almost effrontery.

Maris sat down, and was glad of the respite. Her limbs had begun to tremble. She knew that the child's uninjured right hand lay a few inches from her on the dingy coverlid, and that the great dark eyes were trying to peer through the meshes of the veil. She longed to lift the veil, — to speak her first real word. Would Jane never go? Now she had moved a little.

"Remember," she was warning, "no pryin' questions, — no rubberin'. An' I'll hev to turn you out as soon as I hear her paw comin'. He'd skin me alive fer lettin' you in here, an' take ther money into ther bargain. Oh, he's a sweet man, is Jim Winch."

"I will remember," said Maris. "An' when you tell me he is comin' I'll go out quickly, so that he will not see. Where is the water kept?"

"In that lard bucket near the head uv the bed. Ye'll hev ter be keerful. The dipper leaks."

"I'll be careful, — about everything," said Maris.

Under the green veil she shut her burning eyes, and bit her lips together. Jane was quite still again, looking down upon her. Well, if the recognition had to come, — why, let it. Nothing should keep Maris now from absolute certainty. Already she was practically sure. A moment alone with Lisshy, a touch of the hand lying so near, and the last possibility of doubt would go forever.

At last Jane turned away. She had suspected, or, at least, determined nothing, though her face showed that the stranger puzzled her. With some ostentation she went into the adjoining room and began tugging at the pile of rags that she called bed, until, when she lay down, she could still keep Maris and the child within her line of vision. But this did not trouble Maris. Even to have her in another room was a relief. Soon the poor tired creature would fall off to sleep.

She waited in perfect silence. The sick child on the bed must have felt, by instinct, the tremendous import of the hour, for she, too, was still, asking no more for water, — and waiting, — waiting breathlessly to see what this strange lady was to do now that they were alone.

Jane tossed upon her rags, and sighed. Her back was to the other room. Maris moved around until more of the lamplight would flood her face, and then slowly lifted the veil. Lisshy's eyes, large, brilliant, and full of a suppressed excitement, were fixed upon her. They looked thus, each into the other's eyes for what seemed a century. Then Maris put out her hand. The child shivered, and for an instant let her lids fall. A feeling of delicious peace crept over her. She could rest now while this wonderful lady held her hand. She did not want to sleep, because

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she feared the vision would go. Just to lie there, with that touch upon her. When she looked up again she thought that a new light must have come into the room, — but it was only the reflection of the lady's face on hers.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LAUGHING OWL

SUCH moments can not, from their very nature, persist. They are the poise of an arrow which must inevitably fall, the high note of a song which must come to a close. Already the child's great eyes had begun to question. Maris felt that she must break the silence, and so leaned over, asking, "Does the poor little arm hurt much, now?"

Relief showed in Lisshy's face. The very commonplaceness of the words put her at ease.

"Nome. Not so much." Then she added, as if wishing to be accurate: "The doctor he put some cold stuff on it so's to keep it from hurtin' too much."

"Ah, that was good," said Maris.

Her smile was echoed faintly by the small face among the parti-colored rags. A new silence fell over the room. From the adjoining chamber came heavy, regular breathing, telling them that Jane Rumbough had fallen into exhausted sleep. Lisshy evidently felt it incumbent upon her to entertain the visitor.

"Las' year the nail to me t'um' (thumb) was tore clean off," she announced, not without pride.

Maris tried to restrain her shudder. "Which hand, — this?" she asked, lifting the right one.

"Nome. This here tied up hand. The nail's growed back sence. Hit don't look so very bad.

Some o' the girls is got whole fingers chopped off. The machinery does it, ef'n you don't look out."

This time the shudder was not to be repressed. "It is sickening to think of!" she murmured.

"De doctor-man was fer sawin' my whole arm off," cried Lisshy, pleased with the emotion she evoked. "But dat Yankee lady wouldn't let him do it."

Maris dropped her head, whispering some indistinguishable words. Lisshy felt them to be commendatory of the Yankee lady, and went on: "She was sure nice. I never see sech a clean lady." Her eyes seemed to add, "and you are nice, too," but the child's lips were too shy to speak the words.

Maris slipped from the hard box to her knees, bringing her face closer to Lisshy, and with a trembling hand began to smooth out the matted tresses, and remove the scraps of cotton lint.

"Is there a comb and brush that I could get?" she asked. Always the speaking was in low tones, for fear that Jane would wake.

"Paw's got a comb some'ere. Me an' Mawmer don't hev time to use none. Hit mus' be in the next room, I reckon."

"Never mind. I'll take one of my own side combs,—it will answer beautifully. Now, dear, tell me if I hurt you."

"Yes'm," replied Lisshy, meekly. She longed to say that she did not believe so kind a touch could ever hurt. Once freed and smooth, the quality of Lisshy's hair was exquisite, the color a rich seal-brown with no hint of red, matching the older head that bent so near.

"I never was clost to anybody what smelt sweet like you," said Lisshy, after some moments of this wordless ceremony.

Maris could only smile at her.

"'Cep'n," the child went on, "that old dream uv mine." Her brows puckered. She tried, evidently, to catch the end of a drifting thought.

"What sort of a dream was that?"

"Erbout a lady, — a lady jes' like you. She used to lif' me up, an' hold me tight in her arms, like I was a kid. An' de sweet smell flowed all 'round us, jes' like it is doin' this minute."

Maris swallowed hard. "Do you ever have that dream now?" she questioned.

"Not hardly ever," answered Lisshy, and shook her head mournfully. "I used to all the time. Wunst I tole Paw erbout it. He was that mad he cussed an' knocked me on the head so that I had a risin'. I ain't never spoke of it to anybody else, until jes' now."

"I'm glad you told me, dear. I wish you would tell me all your dreams and thoughts. You don't have many people to speak to beside the mill laborers, do you?"

"Nome. They ain't no time. Besides, de overseer is allays tellin' us not to talk with no outside people that asts us questions. I don't know why, but our folks beats us terrible if we answers questions. I reckon they is ashamed uv us bein' under-sized. They makes the littlest ones run an' hide when strange visitors gits into de mills. De overseer won't even let de Yankee bosses see us."

"Yes, dear, — but I mustn't let you talk so much now. I promised your — Mrs. Winch — I wouldn't. It will make your fever worse. Don't you want some water?"

The child nodded eagerly, and tried to rise on the uninjured elbow.

"Don't move an inch," said Maris hastily. "I can lift your head and give you the water, too."

This proved a more difficult operation than she had thought, owing to the many pinhole leaks in the rusty dipper. Finally by wrapping the bowl of it in her linen handkerchief, and giving the water before the cloth was entirely saturated, she managed to succeed.

"I wisht it warn't so powerful hot an' slimy," murmured the child.

"If only I knew where to go, I would get you some fresh water. Couldn't you tell me where the well is?"

"Hit's a pump, way round the other side o' Miss Crabtree's house," said Lisshy. "But I don't want you to go. I'm skeered you won't come back."

"O Lisshy, — Lisshy, — I would never go away from you one minute, — never again, — if only —"

She broke off, hiding her face in the bed clothes. The heavy breathing in the next room had ceased, but whether because of waking or a profounder sleep, Maris could only guess. It served nevertheless to recall her to a sense of danger, and she sat upright again on the hard box. Lisshy, for the first time, closed her eyes, and began to toss her head restlessly from side to side. "My head's hurtin' bad now," she moaned, "an' all the mill buzzin' is comin' back into my ears."

"Didn't the doctor leave some instructions, — some medicines?" asked Maris, taking alarm.

Yes, Jane Rumbough was now awake. Maris heard her give an impatient sound, and drag herself upward to her feet. "What's up, — Lisshy worse?" she asked, slouching into the sick-room.

"An accession of fever, I fear," answered Maris, primly keeping her unveiled face out of the light. "Have you a clinical thermometer so that I may take her temperature?"

Jane's lip curled at the precision and pedantry of this Northern woman's speech. "I bleeve that is something he called a clinkerty thermometer over there by the lamp," she said, with a careless gesture in that direction. "He tried to learn me how to read the numbers, — but Lord, — my eyes is so blind with 'drawin'-in' I can't hardly read the circus signs."

"I understand how to do it," said Maris eagerly. "Is there a pencil and a piece of paper to register the temperature?"

"I bleeve he lef' those, too," said Jane drily. "I don't know nothin' about registerin' temperatures."

Maris glanced swiftly toward the box that served for a table. Yes, there were a thermometer, a pencil and a chart. She longed to reach and use them, feeling, for the first time since entering, that she might accomplish actual good. But she dared not walk into that circle of light, however wan, while Jane stood near. While she hesitated, Jane turned toward the front door, muttering: "Bleeve I'll step out an' see ef they's any signs uv Winch." Before she reached the knob, Maris had taken the thermometer, and was slipping it under Lisshy's tongue. The act of service, small though it was, brought to her heart a warm suffusion of gratitude, — to her aching eyes the mist of tears. To have wept at this moment, openly, by her sick child's bed, would have been a heavenly comfort. But the time had not come for that. Lisshy's big eyes still had a puzzled look in them. They both could hear Jane's step upon the frail "gallery" as she paced up and down looking for the drunken beast she called her husband.

When the three minutes were surely at an end, Maris withdrew the thermometer, and took it to

the lamp. In the instant she had forgotten Jane, — forgotten everything but that she must record exactly what the elusive figures registered. She turned the shining tube this way and that, in the poor light, bending down closer and closer. "One hundred and one and four tenths," — not so bad, taking all things into consideration.

Lisshy was watching her, as she read the figures. Neither noticed that Jane Rumbough stopped at the window and gazed through the greenish panes, at first with a look of curiosity touched with scorn, then with a start of wonder, a growing recognition, — a surprise so great, so unexpected, that she shrank back in the dark, pressing her scrawny hands upon her lips for silence.

"My God!" the woman whispered to herself. "It's her, — it's Miss Maris. She's run us down at last!"

For an instant she shrank back from the dim light of the window, and remained in a crouching attitude of fear. Then suddenly she wheeled and stared down the valley to the bright store. "What'll Jim Winch say when he hears?" she whispered. Now she crept back to the window. Perhaps, after all, her weary eyes had played her false.

Maris still stood within the circle of light. Her face, averted, was set in the direction of Lisshy, and the long green veil clouded her shoulders and fell far below the waist. Her bare left hand, hanging limp against the dark folds of skirt and veil, showed clearly. Jane could see on the third finger a little black cameo ring, an heirloom that Maris had always worn, and, above it, a wedding-ring, — not the thin loop of pale gold which the ne'er-do-weel, James Martin, had provided, but a massive flat band, almost red with its heavy lustre. As the woman

stared, motionless, a slow look of relief grew upon her face, followed by a more acute expression of malicious satisfaction.

"Married ergin, is she?" the thin lips muttered. "An' married rich, I'll bet, fer all she's dressed up to-night to look po'. That's the reason she was skeered fer me to see her face. Hump! Ain't claimin' Lisshy in no sort of a hurry, neither!" Here she gave a chuckle. "Reck'n me an' Jim's all right, — all right!"

She sauntered back now into the sick-room, trying to speak and act in her former sullen, half-resentful manner. It was hard to keep the excitement out of her colorless voice. "Guess I'll step round to the pump, an' fetch Lisshy some cool water," she announced.

"Pray do," said Maris. "The little girl was wishing for some. Here's the pail." She stooped to lift the rusty utensil, but Jane waved it back.

"Never mind. I've got plenty mo' lard buckets. 'Bout all you do make outer that thievin' store." Then, narrowing her eyes, as if to see, for once, the other's face, she added: "Kin I count on you stayin' here with Lisshy till I git back?"

"Assuredly you may," returned the other. "She is in no condition to be left alone."

"Then I kin count on it," repeated Jane, with a crooked grin, and hurried out into the night. How was it that she had failed to recognize that voice, even with its attempted disguise of Northern intonation?

When she had gone, a deeper sense of nearness, of a more utter and poignant intimacy, tugged at the hearts of the mother and her child. The latter had no clue to it. The mystery troubled even while it stirred her, and now it began to mingle with the

excitement of her fever. Her one beautiful dream came back in glittering fragments, dissolving even while she grasped for them. Now the throbbing of a great pain came to the bandaged arm, and she cried out that the machinery had caught her, and was tearing her to pieces against the floor.

Maris, filled with an alarm she dared not show, looked about for some means of soothing the tortured child. The water in the tin pail was low, but, since, at any moment, Jane would be returning with a cooler draught, she would use this now for bathing the sufferer's hot forehead. She took her linen handkerchief, wrung it out in the water, and began, very gently, to pass it across Lisshy's brow. The child smiled and drew a sigh as of deep satisfaction. The perfume had come nearer to her senses; again she possessed her dream, and, for a few blessed moments, she slept.

The heart of the watching woman seemed about to burst. She longed to cry out, to wake the child and tell her of their true relationship, to hold the meagre body close, — close, — as the dream lady always did. But inch by inch she fought back these fierce, maternal impulses. For the child's sake more than her own she must keep guard upon every word. The tension could not last long, at best. She felt the hot breath of the Fates upon her neck.

Lisshy had opened her dark eyes. "My! but that does feel good!" she murmured. "Nobody ain't never done that to me before."

"Why, dear, I do believe you look better for it already," answered Maris, with a smile as sweet as the child's own. "Your hair is soft and smooth as a little brown thrush's breast. Now if I only had a fresh, clean 'nightie' to slip on, instead of this old day dress, you would be perfect."

“ ‘ Nightie? ’ — what do you mean by a ‘ nightie? ’ ” asked the child.

Maris laughed tenderly. “ Just a sort of pet name for a dear little girl’s nightgown.”

Lisshy still looked blank.

“ Nightgown, dear. The thin white garment we put on at bedtime to sleep in.” Before the sentence was finished, she had realized that the word was an unknown one in Jane Rumbough’s cottage, — probably in the whole mill village.

“ I ain’t never seen or heered of one,” said Lisshy, fretfully.

“ Well, never mind. They are not half so important as getting well.”

The child smiled again, reassured by the tender voice, and closed her heavy eyes. Maris bent over her hungrily. In spite of years of poverty and uncleanliness, the little face had not lost all of its delicate beauty. The deadened skin was of exquisite texture; the hair soft and light as dusky thistle-down.

“ You ’pears to like kids mighty well,” came in drowsy tones from the bed. “ Ain’t you got no little girl o’ your own? ”

Maris could not answer on the instant. She pressed her right hand hard against her mouth, and, for one convulsive clutch, held her quivering throat. Then, with a commendable degree of steadiness, she answered: “ There is no little girl in my home.”

Lisshy’s next words were somewhat startling. “ I knows where you lives,” she said.

“ You do? Why how did you find that out? ”

“ I seen you at the window that day we wuz all dancin’ at yo’ gate.”

“ Yes. I remember now. You were the littlest girl.”

"Yo' face at that up-stairs window wuz so funny-lookin', an' white, we-all thought you wuz a ghost, — an' run. Why wuz you lookin' so strange an' scairt that day, Lady?"

"Oh, it was the dance, — that terrible, terrible dance! You must never be in such an awful thing again."

"But I got to," said Lisshy, practically. "I got to go in the real thing, not the make-believe, next time. Jes' ez soon ez I kin stand on my two feet an' use this good han' in the mill, de Whipper-in will be ridin' atter me. Hands is sca'ce at de mill. They's lots o' bandaged kids workin' —"

"But you are not to go! They sha'n't drive you back, — they sha'n't, — no matter what —" she broke off, seeing the child's startled eyes. "I think it wicked for any child who is not well to be made to work," she concluded lamely, but with less vehemence. Lisshy, with the tolerance of a wider experience, made no further effort to enforce her point of view. She knew well enough that she would have to work, and that all the tenderness and pity of this marvelous, gentle being now beside her, would weigh nothing against the first lash of Tate's long rawhide whip.

Maris, for her part, whirled into a sudden dizziness by the child's acceptance of so hideous a lot, strove in vain for calm. Her mind, darting like a distracted insect to each new point of danger, began to see in Lisshy's knowledge of her home, a tangible menace. When, once more, she could control her speech, she leaned close, to say, with impressiveness: "Lisshy, though you know where I live, I don't want you to tell any one else that you know, until I give you leave."

"Nome, — I mean, — yas'm," said Lisshy, a

little wearily. These restrictions upon her speech were a part of her ordinary existence, and did not even excite curiosity.

"But you are perfectly sure that you *do* know the house, — and the way to get to it?" Maris persisted.

"Yas'm, — hit's that big new one with four stone posts in front. The minister said hit was builited by the Reginy mill boss what died."

"Yes, that is the house. The 'Brattle house' they call it. If you should be in danger, Lisshy, — if, — if — people should try to hurt you, or drive you back to the mill, or take you away, — and you can make your way to that house, — you will be safe. Remember that, — you will be *safe*, — but you must not tell any one else of this."

"Nome," said Lisshy. She was indifferent no longer. Dimly she felt that this secret, shared now with this wonderful, strange lady, was a great charge laid upon her. Had she ever heard a fairy tale, she would have likened Maris instantly to the traditional fairy godmother, but the world of imagination had been shut out from Lisshy's ears by the whirl of bobbins, the endless clatter of machinery. So, now, to express her sense of privilege, she could only declare: "I won't tell a single soul, — cross my gizzard! An' ef they asts me, — I'll lie fer it. Paw says I kin lie like sixty!"

"I don't think you will need to lie, dear," said Maris, with a spasm of the heart. "Just say nothing, and no questions will be asked. I never want you to speak an untruth."

"Honest, I don't mind a bit," Lisshy assured her. "I'd do anything on dis earth you ast me, — even killin' myself," she said more shyly, and put out the claw of her uninjured hand.

Maris bent her head far over it. The bitterness,

the humiliation, the hypocrisy of her present situation went over her slowly in a warm, black wave. Now her throat filled with it, her eyes went softly blind, she was sinking through it, down, down, to a blessed unconsciousness. Then the weak voice of a child came to her, pulling her upward through the darkness. "Lady, would you mind doin' that to my forehead agin?"

Under the gentle, regular strokes, Lisshy fell into her first real sleep of the night. Her breath came steadily, and for the moment the pain went from her face. Maris rose softly, turned the lamp lower and shaded the flame with the chart left by Dr. Page. She then opened by cautious inches the small, square window that faced the west. The cooling tide of night flowed in, bearing with it small, distant woodland sounds, the chirp of crickets, the hoarse croaking of frogs in the valley, and, far, far off, the laugh of a huge night-owl.

She went back to the bed, and began to draw the rags up closer about Lisshy's throat and chest. The handkerchief was once more dipped in water, wrung, and laid across the sick child's forehead. Maris took her seat on the soap-box, huddling near, her eyes on the small unconscious face. In this dimmer light Lisshy looked younger, almost a baby, and the beauty of innocent and happy childhood hovered in a pale reflex upon her mouth.

Crouching thus, immovable for fear of waking the invalid, a sort of reaction came to Maris' overstrung nerves and brain. A strange lethargy of peace possessed her. She had never been more widely awake, yet thought stopped with her, and she seemed to herself only a fibre of the noiseless hour. The village around the Winch's cottage was stiller than the depths of a primeval forest. Sud-

denly the child screamed out: "Don't twis' my arm so, Daddy! Don't twis' it! Fo' God, I'll go to de mill dis minute, — only leave go my arm!"

Maris, stung to life, was on the bed, her cheek against Lisshy's cheek, her hands clasping the free right hand that was fighting back the imaginary enemy. "No one is here but me, Lisshy. No one shall hurt you. Keep your hand still. It is only the pain in the other arm."

The child cowered against her, and put up a hand to feel whether indeed the benign presence were a reality. "I thought it was Paw, drivin' me back a'ready," she gasped.

"It was only a dream. No one shall hurt you."

"I'm skeered all the time that you are jes' a dream," said Lisshy, bursting for the first time into childish, uncontrolled sobbing. In spite of the pain it gave, Maris was thankful to see that she could abandon herself to weeping, like any normal child. "I'm skeered you are the dream an' will go away an' leave me," sobbed Lisshy.

"I'm here now, at any rate," said Maris. "And I am going to stay with you just as long as I can."

"But you'll have to go when the mill whistles," said Lisshy. "An' it mus' be clost onto that time now."

"Don't talk or think about my going, darling. Only let us be thankful that I can be here now. Put your poor little cheek against mine. Now I will hold this hand close while you go to sleep again."

Obedient always, the child closed her eyes, and after an interval, Maris was sure that she slept.

The words about the mill whistle remained in her mind to vex it. In a night like this time loses its true proportions, yet surely midnight must be past. Maris began to wonder what it was that kept

Jane Rumbough out so long. No suspicion of the hideous truth had yet come to her. What plans she had begun, vaguely, to form were centered about Jane Rumbough only. She had not given a second shuddering thought to the creature who now passed as Jane's husband. Nor, in this first night, had she allowed the image of her own dear husband, of Dwight Alden, to come between her and her plans for Lisshy's deliverance.

Alone she had taken the first, and most vital step. She had reached Lisshy, and knew that it was her child. Because of the little one's desperate illness, and the many complications, she intended to go no further until she should have consulted Dr. Singleterry. Oh, if there were but some other woman to help her, — a clear, strong good woman, like Ruth. If she could tell Ruth! And why not? It must be broken in some way to Dwight, and who so fitted as his sister? But then the thought of Ruth's scorn, — her loathing even, — as the miserable story was unfolded, came in a vision to Maris' eyes, and she shut them, saying to herself that she would hardly summon courage for that heroic ordeal.

She got softly from the bed, and took up from the floor her hat and the green veil she had thrown aside at Lisshy's tortured cry. She put these on, and walked toward the door, thinking to look out from the verandah for any sign of Jane. She put her hand on the cheap knob, pausing once more to listen for a sound from Lisshy. The child was still, but up on the slope the great night-owl, flown closer, laughed as if with a demon's ecstasy at human suffering.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE LONG GREEN VEIL

ONCE safely beyond hearing distance of her cottage and its astonishing occupant, Jane Rumbough sped, like a gaunt brown hare, down the slope of the Red Village, toward the Regina store. The wonder of her discovery filled her with an energy and lightness she had not known for years. She did not try to reason out the present situation or to foresee results. The one definite thought that she bore through the night was to impart the wonder to her husband; her clearest hope that she should reach him before the cheap liquor had bereft him of all judgment. This was an occasion to call for all his faculties, the shrewdness of which and his crafty joy in scheming he used to boast. How would he look while she was telling him? What would be his first, spontaneous words?

She ran on, wondering anew at her own activity. Could this be the warped and inelastic body that had begun to seem but a mere part of the angular mill machine? "No mo' drawin'-in-frames an' back-aches fer you, Jane Rumbough," she announced to the night. Even her bleared eyes were regaining vision. Though nearing the level of the valley she was still on enough of a slope to see, over the swinging door of the barroom, the splendid figure of Buck McGhee, as it leaned with back to the high board of

the bar-counter. Around him sat or slouched the usual group of loafers, men who gamed and drank away the wages of women and children. Peering eagerly she saw that Winch was seated in a corner, and that McGhee seemed to be badgering him. Loud bursts of laughter came to her. At these sights and sounds impatience pricked her to new efforts, but in the darker valley speed was almost impossible. Many small gullies were washed in the lower roads; lakes of red slush had accumulated, and the coke and refuse from the mill, cast at random, cut her bare feet, and drew, now and again a sharp exclamation. More than once she stumbled, staggered, and with difficulty regained her footing. She longed to cry out and bring Jim Winch there to her, but her prudence told her that she must ascertain his condition before entrusting him with such stupendous news. She was glad that McGhee was making him angry. Jim's wits were always at their best in a rage. She smiled her grim smile at this thought. Yes, Jim would know how to fix things! Unaccountable as it might seem, this miserable, overworked wreck of a woman still loved the creature who had been her ruin.

Meanwhile, in the barroom down the valley, a typical scene was in progress.

The entire end of the room directly opposite the main entrance was filled by the "bar" itself, a long stretch of polished wood, elbow high. Behind it, on wide shelves backed by cheap mirrors, the glittering array of glass decanters, "mixers," tumblers, goblets and black bottles was set forth. Chairs in various stages of decrepitude stood in clusters about the floor, or were grouped, by force of habit, about the rusty iron stove perched high on its pedestal of a wooden box filled with sand. Though the day **had**

been warm, a low fire of coals still burned, and this, added to the fumes of liquor and tobacco smoke, the heat of the lights and of human bodies, made the place intolerable to one just entering from cool spaces of the night. Besides the chairs, a low wooden bench had been furnished for possible excess of visitors. This ran sheer across the eastern wall, under two dingy windows, the panes of which were never raised. The central prop of the bench was gone so that it could be "bounced," like a child's spring-board, and the oaken surface, worn to a high polish, was smooth to glassiness. It was one of the coarse jokes of the place to test a man's degree of intoxication by forcing him to the middle, and bouncing him violently on each side. If sufficiently drunk he would soon fall forward, an inert mass upon the floor; but if only partially affected, would take his "medicine" with grins or oaths, according to his nature, and gradually make his way along the bench to one of the corners, where he would be safe. Jim Winch, darker and more sullen than ever, had just experienced this pleasantry, and was securely wedged in the corner next the tall bar, scowling, wordlessly, at the laughs and jibes which pursued him.

On that evening it was noticeable that Winch was the selected target for most of McGhee's jokes. No mention had been made of Lisshy. No one of the group would have dared outspoken condolence until an opening had been made by the overseer. But there was a subtle uneasiness in the air, born of the knowledge of the accident and its suppression. There was no doubt that in Red Village, McGhee was the ruling power. His strong will dominated conditions as surely as his handsome head rose high over the heads around him. It was not merely that he had succeeded, that, from an unlettered mountain-

boy he had become "the durndest, best mill overseer in three counties," the man possessed in himself a vital magnetism, a compelling self-belief. He was a superb animal, fashioned to prey upon his kind. Without conscience or remorse where the gratification of his passions was involved, he had a sort of bluff good nature, a frank, loud heartiness of address, that conveyed, wrongly, an impression of sincerity. Even the creatures who had suffered most through him, felt their hatred ebb in his presence, only to burn up hotter when his back was turned. Immediately upon entering a room he possessed it, and, so long as he remained, his companions listened, questioned, assented or demurred, but never took the lead.

Now as he stood looking down at the bloated creature on the bench, his fair head thrown backward, his teeth glittering in a smile, no one could have denied his physical attraction.

An old man, with hair so thin and grey that it seemed like wisps of withered grass clinging to his head, had been watching Winch silently with something of compassion in his faded gaze. He now transferred the look to McGhee, and at a clearer sight of him seemed to shrink and cower in a mingling of fear and hate. No one took any notice of the old man, and, at this juncture the red-headed young bartender, known inevitably as "Pinkey," leaned forward and asked a pointed question concerning the gallant's rumored conquest of a young girl, Victoria Crabtree, who, together with the rest of her family had been enticed down by Tate from their mountain farm in order to acquire, within a few weeks as represented, both wealth and social distinction in the thriving new town of Sidon.

Buck turned a slow, pleased smile toward the speaker and asked, in a voice which he strove in vain

to make sedate, "But did you hear that she recipercated, Pink? That's the main spring in these affairs of the heart. Recipercation is the law uv nature. Ain't that so, boys?" His bold eyes took in the circle. A chorus of approval answered him.

"She couldn't hardly hev resisted *Buck*," said Tate, the Whipper-in, when he had re-located his Adam's apple, and could speak for laughing.

Buck drew himself upward by an inch, and glanced over his shoulder at the mirror, as if to see that his good looks were still there.

"They sez old Granny Crabtree's dyin', — dyin' o' mountain-grief," the old man with thin hair piped up suddenly.

Buck and his immediate satellites pretended not to hear this infelicitous remark.

"You're gittin' all-fired clost with de Yankee school marm, Buck," hurriedly interpolated a friend at his elbow.

"A darned good-looker, too, ef she is a Yank," vouchsafed a second boon companion.

"Nothin' doin', boys, nothin' at all," said Buck, in a tone of mystery. "Her an' me have had a few little confabs over the mill, an' such questions. She's a practical reformer, she sez, an' bein' sech, I consider it my duty to assist her in her good works. But that's all there is to it, — straight!" He spoke in a tone of great caution, intended to convey the existence of deeper things unsaid. The extreme gravity of his face threw his listeners into their usual demonstrations of joy. Buck continued to look serious, even a little pained. His great blue eyes, wide and innocent as any baby's, turned plaintively from one suffused face to another.

"You gen'l'men don't seem to understand the art of baitin' hooks," he went on, when partial order was

restored. "Bellowin' boldness fer one sort o' gal, Bible texts an' the repentant sinner fer the next. When you strike a rare breed o' fish, like the school-ma'am, why, nothin' but ignorance an' a noble desire to improve yo' mind will coax her."

"Ain't he a devil! Buck, you sho' kin beat the Dutch! Drinks all 'round fer Buck an' the Yankee school-ma'am!" were a few of the commendatory remarks that now echoed through the room.

Pinkey leaned delicately forth again on his soiled lavender shirt-sleeves, put his pale lips close to the left ear of Buck McGhee, and lisped a foul compliment which would have made a decent man strike him to the earth. But Buck's vanity knew no discriminations. He turned his smiling face to Pinkey, and rejoined, so that the others could hear: "Them stunts ain't to be taught, Pinkey. They comes natural or not at all."

The only men present who withheld tribute were Winch, still lowering in his corner, and the gray old man, who had now taken seat next to him. The latter spoke.

"If you're plannin' any uv your gallant tricks with the Yankee lady, Buck McGhee, I'd advise you to go slow. Her brother looks like the real article to me. He may put a load uv Yankee buck-shot into that shape o' yourn that you're so stuck on."

McGhee gave a contemptuous gesture. "Hog-wash! Yanks don't fight that er way. They go to law an' git damages."

"Seems to me, Buck," drawled Tate, "that yo' chance has come at last to settle down, an' be a respectable famb'ly man. She's got a ekal share in the Reginy with her brother, an' you're the bes' mill boss in the South. What you say? Is it settled?"

Drinks to the future Mr. *and* Mrs.!" He lifted a tentative (and empty) glass.

"No weddin' bells fer me!" laughed Buck. "The bachelor-bee is the best o' the hive. Besides, she mightn't be the kind to appreciate my attention to the new mill-hands that comes in from the hills."

Tate lowered his glass thoughtfully. "That's so. Maybe you're right. I can't think of no matrimonial harness jes' yo' size."

"My heart's too big fer any one woman, an' that's a fact," said Buck. "It would be like runnin' Putnam's Hotel for one measly soap-drummer. An' it ain't no-ways fair to the ladies." He gave a wide gesture and a deep, mocking bow, as if to an invisible aggregate of the sex he traduced. The taint of licentious thought filled the air.

Tate, for a wonder, seemed to be thinking. "The school-ma'am is a good-looker in a chiny-doll sort o' way," he said at length. "But Lord, she ain't within hailin' distance o' Alden's wife. Gee, but them eyes! Like a bunch o' lightnin'-bugs in the dark. Did you see 'em, Buck, when she stood up in the buggy an' hollered at me not to hit Lisshy Winch agin?"

"No," said Buck, grumpily. The image of Mrs. Alden was not a pleasing one. Her instinctive aversion to himself had been all too plainly shown. This had stung, even while it puzzled him. "Didn't see anything to her but a long green veil."

"I seen the veil, too," laughed Tate, "Big as a horse-blanket, only too thin fer use. When the buggy drove off hit stood out straight like a flag." He turned now, speaking directly to Winch. "You seen it too, Winch. She an' the boss drove right past yo' do'."

Winch muttered an indistinguishable succession of grunts, and made as if to rise. His sodden face showed disgust with his surroundings; his small, furtive eyes had gone more than once to the face of McGhee, and turned away. Something, now, in their expression, rasped the self-assurance of the bully.

"Hold on!" he called out insolently. "Hold on long enough to look pleasant. I've stood too much grouch from you, already, — settin' there like a devil's snuff-box ready to pop, while gentlemen are takin' their enjoyment."

Winch gave a stifled oath, and made another effort to rise. Buck stepped a few feet nearer. His sycophants fell back, leaving clear passage.

"You an' old Bones," McGhee went on, half laughing, half angry, "like picters uv before an' after takin', on the mourners' bench. Wake up, Bones. What's the las' news from Luveenia?"

At this unspeakable insult, — for Luveenia was the man's daughter, and her disgrace and abandonment at McGhee's hands were an open secret, — the old creature, lashed into momentary vigor, sprang up, and cried out shrilly: "Don't you darst speak her name to me, you devil, or I'll put a load uv buck-shot into you, myself."

"Oh, no you won't," sneered McGhee, whose anger was already beginning to cool, since it had aroused an answering spark. "You'll jes' set around an' snivel erbout it. Ef you'd bin half a man, you would have done it at the fust; but no, you took the good cottage, — and the double wages what you knew you wasn't worth. You'll do nothin', same as other papas do!"

"Lemme git outer here, — lemme git out, — fo' I try it now," whispered the old man. His face

had grown a chalky yellow. One could see that his courage was oozing fast.

"An' take that rotten beer barrel along," cried out McGhee to him. "This ain't no fertilizing factory."

"Come, Winch," said the old man, trying to help him up. "We'd better go. We can't do nothin' against McGhee. He owns us all."

Winch's face was growing a deeper purple. A single bloodshot vein stood out like an azure cord down the centre of his forehead. He tried to rise, but fury, added to his partial intoxication, and his always precarious strength, hurled him back. McGhee laughed loudly, and the others joined, but with less heartiness.

"Out with you, — old bag o' wind an' blubber," he jeered. "Do you need a wheelbarrow to cart you home?"

"Curse you, — *curse* you," said the tormented man between his teeth. At last he had risen, though still a bloated hand was against the wall for support. "You low-born, common bully, — if ever I get my strength back, you'll hear from this."

"I ain't skeered," said Buck. "Now hustle out, — your company ain't required here any longer. And, fer a piece uv advice — " here a dark look made his face brutal for the moment — "I'd thank you to keep your kids outer my machinery."

Fury, though it weakened Winch's diseased body, had begun to produce an opposite effect on his mind. He faced McGhee now, almost coolly. "And a piece of advice from me to you is: Keep your bands of machinery covered as the law demands, — and you won't have so many accidents. I've more than half a mind to report you to the legislature."

This was going far indeed. Every man in the room

knew well that Lisshy had been injured through negligence, but they would no more have thought of saying it before McGhee than of shaking their fist at heaven when the lightning had just struck. All faces were sober now, and a few showed fright. McGhee alone remained, externally, unmoved.

"I suggest that you try it," he said, quite gently. "You don't suppose I've had a slug like you about me fer a whole year without informin' myself pretty accurate about his past history. I think I could give a little information on my own hook." This was purely a random shot, born of McGhee's keen insight into the cruder phases of human nature. He turned away with a contemptuous laugh, as he saw how the bolt had struck. "You kin consider yourself turned out 'er Red Village," McGhee continued. "I don't want your kind about me. You'll vacate that cottage, too, and the sooner the better!"

A little gasp went up from his auditors. They, like Winch, were thinking of Lisshy and her desperate condition. The sound angered McGhee. "Well, what's the sighin' an' the puffin'?" he demanded fiercely, wheeling upon them. "Am I overseer of this place, or ain't I?"

"I'll get out, you beast, — I'll get, though the kid dies for it. It'll give me a new claim against you. I'll go, — I'll go —" He muttered these words as he stumbled and shambled toward the door.

"Well go, an' the devil go with you!" roared McGhee, as he turned his back, and pounded the counter for fresh drinks.

But another excitement was in store. Just as the hand of Winch was lifted to push back the swinging blind, it was thrust inward with such violence that both he and his companion barely escaped being thrown to the floor. It was Jane, her eyes, usually

so colorless, now dark and shining, her thin face twitching with unwonted animation. "Ah, there you are, Jim. Come quick, — don't stop to ask."

"Is Lisshy — *gone?*" the man whispered. "Old Bones" waited for the answer, "No," then vanished somewhere into the night. Jane and her husband went out arm in arm, and the deserted loungers, after the first stare of wonder, turned to each other glances in which pity gleamed. "The poor little devil's dead," their eyes said.

Even McGhee drew a sigh, as he walked slowly back to the counter. "Poor little critter!" he said, voicing the thoughts of all. "Well, she's lucky to git out uv it so early. They blames us overseers for cruelty, and yet it is the kids' own parents that tells Tate to drive 'em back when they can't hardly keep their feet fer sickness. It's a bad business all round, — this kid-drivin', but all the mills do it, and the Reginy don't take nobody's dust in the road. Here, fellows, drink on me, — drink deep, and let's try to start up a little fun!"

But somehow even the generous drinks did not bring about the desired condition of hilarity. One after another the men made excuse to slip away to the wretched kennels they knew as "home." At length even the valiant McGhee gave up. The lights were extinguished, the doors shut and bolted, and "Pinkey," with sighs of exhaustion, climbed up to his attic chamber over the store, and was soon asleep, dreaming of feminine conquests such as made Buck McGhee at once his idol and his despair.

"You're sure it isn't Lisshy? You are not foolin' me? Speak out, you idiot!" cried Winch again, clutching at his wife's thin arm.

"No, — no. It ain't erbout Lisshy's sickness at

all. She's doin' well. I ain't foolin'. Wait, — jes' a minute mo', twell I get my breath back."

They stood still in the road, and Winch waited with a man's impatience, shuffling about in the red clay, and uttering exasperated sounds.

"You'd never guess, — not in a month uv Sundays," Jane panted out at length. "It's a woman up at our house —"

"That damned, meddling Yankee," interrupted the man. "Didn't I order you to keep her outer my place? Stop clawin' and draggin' me up the hill!"

"It ain't no Yankee. It's — it's — my Gawd! how kin I speak it?"

"You must speak it, — you must!" he cried wildly, though already he had begun to know. His teeth chattered with excitement. Unconsciously he leaned against the woman. "Is it — her?"

"Yes, an' she's there with Lisshy now."

"You left 'em there?"

"Wait; don't blame me till you hear."

"Maris and her child together," repeated the man in a sort of moan. They stood together swaying and shivering like two lost creatures at the brink of a dark pool.

"But don't you git scairt, Jim," the woman said at length, almost tenderly. "It don't mean no further trouble; jes' the contrary. She hid her face from me, though I know she knowd me. She ain't claimin' Lisshy right out. I bleeve she's married agin, thinkin' you was dead, — married rich, too."

"What makes you think she's married again?"

"By her skeered ways, an' the new gold band upon her weddin' finger."

"My ring's thrown in the trash pile, of course," said the man with an ugly laugh.

Jane peered up into his face sharply. "Well,

what's that to you, one way or the other? You quit her." A thin note of jealousy rang through her voice.

"I reckon the quittin' was about equal," said the other. "She had told me never to darken her sight again."

"Proud, stuck-up fool!" said Jane viciously. "She'll be gittin' what's comin' to her now, I guess."

To this James Martin made no reply. He seemed to be revolving some inner thought. Impressions did not register swiftly on his clogged brain. Drink, dissipation and disease had claimed an early reckoning. He now plodded on in silence, his head hung low, while he struggled with the befogging wonder of the facts.

"Married, — the spitfire! Of course she would. That's what I got buried fer, choosin' even a pauper cemetery where another James Martin was already planted. Just what I thought would happen. She could be sweet enough with a chap that didn't — revolt her." He winced, after all these years, at the remembered scorn of the words Maris once had used. A brutal, revengeful look came into his swollen face. "Well, Jane," he said, turning toward his silent companion, "she had it in fer us when we skipped out, — exposure, disgrace, full custody of Lisshy, — all that was plain sailin' in her eyes, until we spoiled her little game. Guess we're all right now, whatever happens."

But Jane, too, was thinking. "Don't get too gay about it all at once," she warned. "We don't know her new name yet, or where she lives, or whether she is surely married. She may jes' have throwed your ring away because she hated it, and bought herself this one."

"That's so," the man admitted. "It isn't likely, but it's possible."

"An' we got to get into the house easy," Jane continued, "so's not to skeer her off."

Now Martin laughed. "Skeer her off!" he mocked. "I know her kind too well. You couldn't prize her away from Lisshy with a crowbar."

He started his slow plodding again. His breath was coming hoarsely with the climb. "The worst part of it is that we don't know her name or where she lives. Why didn't you ask her, Jane?"

"An' have you got the fust idee she'd tell me ef she didn't want me to know?" sneered Jane.

"Then one of us has got to follow her when she leaves the house."

Jane shook her head. "No' good. She'd see us. That piece of moon has come up sence I left." She pointed to where a low, misshapen moon, now in its last quarter, crept along the sky.

The man's footsteps dragged. "By the Lord Harry, we've got to spot her somehow. I tell you, it's got to be. Ain't there something by which you can trace her, — her clothes, — or something?"

"I tell you she was fixed up plain, so's to look poor. An old brown skirt, an' little straw hat covered over with a big veil —"

The man interrupted by a gasp, and a clutch at the speaker's arm. "A veil, — was it big? What was the color?"

"Laws a Mussy, — what do you know about veils, — Jim? Yes, it was big, — big as a blanket, and it was green, too."

She was now thoroughly startled by the loud cry of triumph, and the way the man stopped, beating his hands together, and laughing out, hysterically: "A long green veil, — I got her! Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, — if that ain't rich!"

"Well, don't wake up the town if it is," said Jane,

in a fierce whisper. "Do you want the whole population sheerin' yo' joke?"

"You bet I don't," said Martin. And then he told her.

Conviction came instantly to both. Jane, too, remembered having seen the long veil in the red automobile that was known to be the property of Mr. Alden. It seemed to them both an exquisite bit of irony, almost an extenuation of their own misdeeds, that Lisshy should have nearly met her death in the Alden mill. They hurried forward, chuckling at intervals, and exchanging phrases of triumph.

They were within a few yards of the cottage; the light from Lisshy's window could have touched them, when Martin put a hand out to check his wife. "What you ever done with them Kansas City dy-vo'ce papers, Jane?" he asked, with a hint of conciliation in his voice.

She drew back quickly. "They're safe an' sound," she answered drily. "An' you don't get your hooks on 'em fer any amount o' sweet talk, neither."

The man's face darkened. It was noticeable that always, in speaking to the low-born woman who had become his life's companion, his words, even his voice, assumed a similitude of her own. With people of education he could still comport himself like the gentleman he once pretended to be.

"You fool," he whispered angrily to her last remark. "Who said I wanted to get my hooks on them? But the truth is, —" here the coaxing tone crept in, "that we got to be mighty keerful and not give a hint that any such dy-vo'ce was got. We couldn't skeer her worth a cent, ef she knew about *them*."

"I don't see why not," said Jane stubbornly.

"She ain't goin' to fight the dy-vo'ce at this late day, 'specially when she's married again. An' they make an honest woman outa me."

"Of course you don't see why not," said Martin. "Wimmin don't never understand these legal points. But I felt at the time, an' I feel now, that it was a big mistake to get that dy-vo'ce from her, even though she knew nothin' about it."

"My kid was comin'. I wanted it to be as — straight — as her child was, —" said Jane in a hard, dry voice.

"Yes, we spent sixteen dollars for the papers, an' then your kid died," remarked the man.

Jane did not attempt a retort. Her thin face twitched for an instant, then fell back into its old impassivity. When the steps were reached, she said to him, in a very low voice, "You stop here in the shadow fer a minute, while I go in."

The man was glad enough to pause. Excitement, and the hill-climb together were bringing on symptoms of the dizziness which had troubled him for two years, and sent the pain in his back to a wild throbbing. "My God, — ef I can only get my strength ergin, and stop these infernal aches," he groaned, under his breath.

Jane was mounting the steps without a sound.

Maris was already at the door, her finger pressed against her lips. "Hush," she said softly. "The little girl is sleeping. I can go now."

Jane waited until Maris had stepped out into the wan moonlight. She then straightened her lank figure, and put her arms akimbo. "Skeered you'll git sunburnt that you keep your veil down so clost?" she asked.

The new note of insolence was unmistakable, and could have but one meaning. Strangely enough,

Maris did not even shrink. She glided instantly into one of those strange vacuums of experience where all that happens seems preordained, a mere repetition of the same moment acted centuries before. She knew the expression of Jane's eyes without seeing them; she knew at just what angle her own arms lifted, and how her face looked as she raised the veil and met, calmly, the face of Jane Rumbough. Her own voice was an echo of a long vanished voice that said: "So you have recognized me, Jane?"

The speaker's voice held, unconsciously, the ring of the old authority. Class distinctions are not fragile in the South and, for an instant, in spite of her vicious hatred, her certain triumph, the servant in Jane Rumbough quailed. Then her glance fell on Winch, crouching at the other side of the step, and her courage revived.

"Looks like it, don't it?" she answered with a swagger. "An' it warn't fer any help I got from you. Well?"

"Felicia is sleeping now," said Maris, in the same low voice. "She must not be disturbed. I shall come again to-morrow, and you can say what you will." She made a motion toward the steps, but Jane sprang in front of her.

"I don't know as you have got any call to come ag'in. There ain't nothin' fer me to say. This house, sech as it is, is my house," she went on, with growing insolence; "the kid you are callin' Felicia is my kid. Her name is Lisshy Winch, an' I am Mrs. Winch."

"It is nothing to me, Jane, what you choose now to call yourself, or her. We will adjust it all to-morrow. Now, kindly let me pass."

Jane was all poised for an outbreak of vituperation, when a commanding gesture from the man, unseen by Maris, arrested her. Sullenly she drew back and

her visitor, with more relief than she cared to show, began to descend the steps. Just as she reached the lowest a huge shadow loomed before her, — the figure of a man, Jane's present husband. He would of course be angry that a stranger had gained admittance to his home. Jane had already warned her. Because of this knowledge, and the fear that had begun to flutter in her throat, Maris said courteously: "Good evening, Mr. Winch. I came to inquire about the little sick girl."

He did not move or answer, and after a little pause she gave a gesture of some haughtiness, indicating that he must step aside. Instead of doing this, he folded his arms and laughed. The sinister sound was echoed from the gallery where Jane stood, watching.

"I must insist that you let me pass," cried Maris, on a sharper note. "What do you mean by standing there?"

"I only want to get a right good look at you, Missis Dwight Alden," said the man. He drawled the last three words with a malicious satisfaction. "Missis Dwight Alden," he repeated, and smacked his thick lips over it.

With the first sound of his voice, Maris had known.

It is a superstition in some parts of the South that one who speaks with a ghost goes mad. Maris believed, for an instant, that this fate had come to her; and in the reaction to reality, wished that it had been so.

"James Martin," her white lips whispered, and shook at the long buried name.

"James Martin, or Jim Winch, — just as you please," he answered airily. "We've both took on new labels since our last meeting." Again the malevolent chuckle, and its echo on the gallery.

"And you did not die then, in the West. You were *never* dead?" she cried in a sort of muffled agony. It was a foolish thing to say, but one just thrown upon a heated rack does not remember to be logical.

"You bet I didn't! I'm all here, on top," he answered coarsely. "There was a little shake-up on a Kansas train. Jane lost two teeth in it, — which didn't improve her beauty;" here Jane threw in an oath. "But we pulled through all right, — and here we are."

Maris pressed her cold fingers hard upon her lids. The stars, the moon and the purple sky were reeling. Far overhead the crest of Red Horse Hill seemed breaking in a black foam to engulf her.

"I had the papers, — they swore that you were dead," she moaned as if to herself.

"Well, an' there was another Martin, — Jim Martin, too, — it ain't a patent name, — planted in the Kansas buryin' ground. I took good care that your fool lawyer should get wind uv it! He could have told you that much two years earlier, — only he kept on stringin' you."

Maris whirled toward him in a sort of desperation. Her lips were parted to voice her scorn when a sharp cry from the sick-room came: "Don't twis' my arm so, Daddy. Don't twis' my arm. I'll go to de mill. Fo' God, I'll go!"

Maris' eyes blazed upon the man before her. Now his own wavered; he turned aside, muttering a curse against the child. It brought to the mother her last pang of endurance. She clenched her hands, and shut her eyes tightly, afraid of the savage terror that caught her up as in a flame. Martin was shuffling his heavy feet, and she knew that he attempted self-control. Jane leaned far over to give a sharp com-

mand. Now he had dared to put his hand on Maris' sleeve.

"Don't touch me," she said to him, her voice so low, so full of hate, that he was startled. "Don't touch or speak to me again, just now, or I shall try to kill you!"

He fell back, and the woman on the gallery gasped. Before another sound could reach her, Maris had turned, and was fleeing up the slope of Red Horse Hill.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A TRAFFICKER IN SOULS

THEY stood together, man and wife, for such, according to the queer laws of our country, they undoubtedly were, and, in silence, watched the flying figure. Only when it had vanished upward into the fringe of the wood, did Jane speak.

"You still feel sure she'll stand by Lisshy, — that she won't give us the slip?"

"Sure."

"Well, she's gone. What you starin' after?" The jealous note rang again in her voice.

Martin shrugged, and began the ascent of the stairs. "It will be a tussle with her, I reckon," he muttered, more to himself than Jane. "It's her child fast enough, an' she knows it. On th' yother hand —" he paused, one misshapen foot on a higher step, "she's stuck on her new Yankee husband, curse him! I saw it by the way she huddled up against him in the buggy, that day."

"You fool! air you after carin' whether or not she's stuck on her new husband?" demanded Jane.

The man grinned. "Of course I care. I want her to be stuck on him. The more she is stuck, the more she'll pay to keep next to him."

"Oh," said Jane slowly, "is that your idee?" Her voice showed relief, but there was still a reservation of mistrust. Being a woman, she had a clearer in-

tuition as to Maris' probable course of action; but this was not the time to impart her fears.

The man was dimly conscious of thoughts withheld. "Well," he asked sharply, "don't you think we can make her pay?"

"You bet we kin," said Jane through set teeth, but she was thinking of a different thumb-screw.

"Looks like easy-street fer us at last, ole girl," said the man, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder and, for an instant, drawing her close. The poor creature thrilled to his caress. "Let's go in an' sleep on it," he added, as the level of the porch was reached.

He shuffled into the room adjoining that of Lisshy, but Jane, continuing her swift steps, went to the sick child's bed. She lay in a blessed sleep. The shaded lamp, the cool night air hurrying in through the opened window, had both been beneficial. The small, sleeping face had a look almost of peace. Her bandaged arm rested beside her like a huge doll in a shroud. Across her forehead was spread a folded handkerchief.

This the woman removed very gently, carrying it over to the lamp. Corner after corner she searched, bending close, her weak eyes gathering wrinkles of effort. Finally she found and read the one word "Alden," beautifully embroidered on sheer linen. A grim smile flitted across her face. Before restoring it she dipped it anew in water, wrung and folded it, and replaced the cooling band with a touch as gentle as Maris' own. She stared a moment longer into Lisshy's face. "Po' little devil," she muttered, "hit's bin hardest on her all erlong. An' a good kid, too, as ever I see." Then she went back to Martin.

Up in the forest-strip stood Maris, her arm about a wild-cherry tree, her cheek pressed hard against its

cool, smooth bark. The small white blossoms, set thick among the overhanging leaves, sent down a fragrance at once cloying and bitter-sweet, but she did not smell them. The weird moon hung, inverted and ill at ease, among fading stars, but her wide-set eyes saw none of it. A screech owl near at hand lifted its long, shivering cry, but Maris' ears were stone. The first shock of discovery had left her insensate. Her very frame felt like an emptied shell, one of those frail cocoons that winged creatures tolerate for a while, then rend and spurn. It was her winged soul that had gone, circling in heights or depths that her dull body could not apprehend, and she must wait thus, dumbly, until it dragged its tattered pinions back. She shuddered violently, as consciousness returned. With it was a half-formed instinct, a desire to cross the wood, and go down the darker slope, — but where, — to what redress? She could not answer this, but she felt that she must be stirring. Stumbling and still half-blind, she found her way through the close-set trees, and came out into the road upon the western slope. This she followed downward, not knowing whether it was a moment or an hour in which the long, winding route was made.

Once in the city, with hard pavements under her feet, the pain of walking brought back a clearer consciousness. Dwellings of men lifted their dark rectangles on this side and on that. The Gothic spire of St. John's was held against the stars. It brought a new suggestion. She put her hand to her forehead, and stared upward, trying to fix the thought. Yes, there was something about church spires that hinted at mercy for those in great distress. The face and name of Dr. Singleterry flashed in an instant to her darkened mind. She ran, now, to the rectory

gate, put her two hands upon it, shook it, and then paused. What, if she went in, was she to say to him? Would not an intruder at this late hour, — and indeed, she had no way of judging how late it might be, — disturb and shock the old man? She wanted him to know the terrible thing, and yet, if she faced him now, she would have no words to speak. There must be some other place where she could turn, — where she could creep, like a wounded animal, until these curious brown clouds passed from her brain, and all these strange arrows be plucked from her quivering body. Turning, she made her way onward, down the hill, then up again. As she neared the top, four great white monoliths rose up like bars to a giant gate.

Now the reviving agony seized her. She knew at last just who she was, and what was the meaning of this midnight wandering. She must not pass in through those white towers, perhaps never again could she pass them. She recalled the little alley in the rear, opening into the servants' gate. Yes, that was her place, if, indeed, she had so much claim on the Alden house. Turning again, she found the alley, and soon had reached the gate. By this the shoes were practically from her feet. Her skirt dragged with an intolerable load of clay. Sensations of physical pain attacked her all at once, in limbs, eyes, head and heart. She welcomed them, as the fanatic his scourge.

Now she was beginning to totter. She could not lie here in the road like a sick dog. That would be bad for Dwight. She seized one of the gate-posts and clung to it while the ague passed. Then she went in and crept toward the servants' gallery. Aunt Mandy's snores came regularly, and no beckoning sail to a shipwrecked mariner ever evoked more

relief. She knew that a human presence was near, the old, fat cook who called her "honey," and "Miss Maris." "Who am I now?" thought Maris, but she did not try to answer. Dragging herself by stealthy inches across the boards, she reached the threshold of the old negress' closed door, and lay against it. The aching of her body, drowned, for a few moments, every other thought. She waited there, half delirious with pain, holding her life by intervals that were measured in Aunt Mandy's snores.

Now from the valley beyond Red Horse Hill, the whistle shrieked.

"You must go when the mill whistles," Lisshy had said.

Maris sat up; Aunt Mandy's stentorian sounds had stopped. The old woman was tossing in her bed. Evidently the whistle was her summons also.

Maris now stood, clutching at the side of the door for aid, and, at a sudden forward sound of the old woman the other side of the door panel, took fright, and sped up-stairs toward her own dressing-room. Scarcely knowing what she did, she entered and turned the key. Softly now she tried the other door, the one opening into Dwight's chamber. To her great relief it, too, was locked. Now, with fevered haste, she began to strip off her soiled and tattered garments, rolling them into a bundle, and thrusting them to the farthest corner of her closet. As well as she could, for caution, she washed away the mud stains from her hands and feet, then, putting on clean clothing and a wrapper, lay down on her couch, and watched the gray dawn deepen. The words of an old, forgotten poem flashed to her:

"God help the soul whose grief lies bare,
Before the sneering smile of dawn."

One after one, familiar sounds rose, the drowsy clatter of the milk cart, the opening of windows and of doors, the silver-sweet tones of the mulatto girl, Poline, answering Aunt Mandy, or calling back some arch reply to the house-boy. Maris drank all in. They would never be hers again. Even in this crux of misery, there was a sort of satisfaction in pretending they still were hers.

She listened breathlessly as she heard her husband rise and move softly about the chamber for fear of waking her. Agony sharpens the senses after the first numbing shock, and it seemed to Maris, at times, that the walls must have dissolved in the chill air, so clearly did every sound in the adjacent room come to her ears. Now he had gone into his dressing room; now he was standing before the chiffonier, brushing his hair. She could see the very curve of the dark locks on his forehead. Before going down-stairs he knocked very lightly on her door, and whispered her name as if he loved it. The miserable woman struck herself full on the mouth with a clenched fist, and held it pressed there cruelly, lest she should answer and betray herself.

Now he turned, still gently, and moved across the room toward the hall and the stairway. Maris dropped her hand, and gave a groan of agony. The sickening, salt taste of blood was in her mouth. "My God, — my *God*, — how is it that I can stay alive with this!" she whispered, but even before the words were out, the vision of Lisshy's starved face answered them.

While Mr. Alden and his sister Ruth were in the dining-room, Poline came to her mistress' door, asking, in a whisper, whether she should bring up some breakfast. Maris got to her feet, went to the door and, without opening it, told the girl to bring

her a tray with strong coffee, nothing else. She heard Poline still hesitate.

"Well," she cried sharply.

"Mr. Alden's got a telegram calling him away. He says he may have to be off several days, and can't you see him a minute before he leaves?"

Maris caught her breath. Here was something like a respite. And surely it could do no harm to see him just this once before he left her, — to pretend, for one more heavenly moment, that she was his loving wife! Her lips opened for a message of assent, when, by chance, she caught the reflection of her face in a mirror. She shut her eyes at the vision, and cried out, "No, Poline, — tell him I'm not well enough, I'm, — wait, — I will write a little note to him."

After a frantic search for pencils and a scrap of paper (Maris' personal belongings were seldom in their places), she wrote and folded the following words:

"No, don't try to see me. I am no worse in sickness, but I look too ugly. I don't want you to carry away this memory of me. Don't keep from going for fear that I am worse. I am not. O, my dearest, — I love you. That is all that I must say, — I love you.

"MARIS."

When the time came for him to leave the house she crept to the front chamber window, and watched him until the tall figure disappeared. The soul went out of her eyes to follow him. Retracing her steps, she paused by the bed where he had slept, and buried her face for an instant in his pillow.

When Poline came with the coffee, she asked

whether Ruth were still down-stairs. "She's just gone out the front door, fer a little mornin' walk," said Poline. "Shall I tell Archer to run after her?"

"No," said Maris. "I can easily wait until she returns. But let me know at once."

"Yas'm," said Poline, giving a last curious glance as she backed toward the door. Maris knew well that the curiosity, always alert in the negro race, had been stirred in Poline to the highest pitch by her mistress' ghastly face, and the refusal to say good-by to a husband, openly adored. To divert crude speculations, Maris said suddenly to the girl: "Poline, I have decided to give you that new red gown of mine, — I am afraid it is too young for me, after all, and it will become you perfectly."

Poline was rooted to the spot at once. Her great brown eyes and her mouth widened. "You don't mean that new red dress from *Paris*, with de hand-embroidery!"

"Indeed I do. Go, get it now from the closet."

Poline ran like a deer, as if afraid in the brief interval Maris might change her mind. She jerked it out, turning it this way and that, holding it up to her waist, then to her beautifully modelled throat. Everything else, — even the giver, was forgotten.

"Maybe them yellow gals won't sit up when I switches down the ballroom in *this*!" she cried to her reflection in the mirror. "Thank you, Miss Maris, — thank you a million times. I never is owned nothin' like this in all my life."

"I'm glad that it can make you happy, Poline," said the other, kindly.

Maris watched the retreating figure, still smoothing and fondling the shimmering curves of silk, and something like a smile touched her lips. A few days ago

she, too, had been childishly happy at the receipt of the beautiful gown; she had worn it for Dwight, flaunting this way and that, and laughing with the joy it gave, and all that time Lisshy had been working, too ill almost to stand; and this awful hour had been creeping through the dark.

She rose again, bathed her hot face and hands in cold water, and went to the window, gazing out toward Red Horse Hill. What energy remained — and it was marvellous how the brief rest, the coffee and the fresh air had helped her — was concentrated on her new determination to relate the whole terrible situation to Dwight's sister. Nothing that Ruth, from her pinnacle, could say or do could add to a misery already so intense. Her lofty anger, however self-justified, would seem as trivial as Poline's gratitude. And the fact remained that Dwight must be told. He must not be allowed to hear of his degradation from outsiders. As well as she could love anything, Ruth loved this brother. Yes, it was Ruth's part, — her privilege, to be told everything, and in the best way she could devise, break it to Dwight.

A sudden, loud whirring came to the electric button at the front door. Maris involuntarily turned her head toward it. The ring was unfamiliar, bold, — a braggart's ring. "So early, — so very early?" whispered Maris to herself. She ran to the door and listened. There was no doubt of it. Archer was trying to drive the creature out, but he was laughing, holding his ground. Poline ran hurriedly upstairs.

"It's a man from the mill, — Miss Alden, — an' awful lookin' critter. Archer says sha'n't he go fer de police?"

"Did the man give a name?"

"Nome, but he told me to say that he was the father of the little girl that was hurt, and he wasn't gwinter leave till you saw him."

"Put him in Mr. Alden's study," said Maris, turning so that she need not meet Poline's incredulous eyes. "It is for the little girl's sake that I must see him. Tell him I will be down."

The fear, the trembling, both passed from Maris. She dressed herself with steady hands, and walked, without hesitation, down the white marble steps.

When she entered the study, closing the door behind her, Martin was still on his feet. His bloated hands were clasped behind his back, in an affectation of ease, and he swaggered up and down before the bookshelves, reading the titles aloud.

"Good morning," he said, beginning to turn. "Cosy little nest you have here. You always did like books."

"I am not surprised that you have come. Now kindly state your object in the visit." Maris drew herself up, her back against the oaken panel of the door. Deliberately the man now faced her, a sneer on his thick lips, and a bold stare in his bloodshot eyes. She remained impassive; her eyes, beneath half-closed lids, met his without flinching. Perhaps a quiver of disgust touched, for an instant, the sensitive upper lip, for now the man flushed, his eyes fell, and he blurted out:

"The high and mighty isn't your best tactics, my lady. I've got the best of you this time."

"You have always had the best of me," returned Maris, quietly. "Surely that is not what you have come here to say."

The man strove hard to regain his self-assurance, and, in a manner, succeeded. "I suppose you recognized the kid as yours, last night."

"At once. I knew it was Felicia the moment I entered the room."

"But she don't know. You didn't give a hint to her?"

"No, it would have been bad for her fever,— besides,—" she hesitated, then deliberately continued,— "I do not think the time has come."

"Oh, you don't!" he laughed coarsely. "Well, and what is your idea of the proper time, Mrs. Dwight Alden?"

She did not reply to this, and after an interval of restlessness on his part, and of heavy breathing which he strove in vain to regulate, he said:

"Well, am I to be kept on my feet all day? Let's sit down and talk it over."

"You may be seated," said Maris; "I prefer to stand." After a moment, as if impelled by courtesy, she added: "You do not seem to be very strong."

In this clear morning light the man's spotted skin, and red-rimmed eyes, betrayed, remorselessly, the diseased degenerate. His neck, swollen to twice the normal size, disappeared into rolls of unhealthy fat. He wore no collar, and the top button was off his shirt. He was an object to make any decent woman shudder, and during the interview there were moments when Maris could have hidden her face in shame at the thought of this wreck being once her husband, the father of her child. He was now seated, and the relief of the new posture brought back something of ease.

"I'd advise you not to worry over my state of health, my dear," he mocked. "Jim Martin's good for many a day to come."

It was the voice and manner of the man as she had known him.

"I was sure that you were dead," she cried im-

petuously. "I received proofs of it, — certain proofs, — as I thought."

"Well, me and that shyster lawyer had something to do with those proofs. We both thought it a shame that you shouldn't have another chance. An' you took it, — by God! you took it!" He slapped his coarse hand down on his knee, as if at a delightful joke.

For the first time Maris addressed him of herself: "Will you tell me this, James Martin, — tell me as truthfully as you can, now that we have met again, what evil do you consider that I did to you, — you and my servant, — that you should combine to put upon me all these terrible wrongs?"

"You know well enough," he answered. "You showed that you couldn't bear the sight of me, — and when I was — well, — a little soft on Jane, being an affectionate nature, you threatened to ruin the poor girl's reputation. It was her idea, taking Lisshy with us."

"A woman knows how to hurt another woman," said Maris. "But it was your plan to pretend death, so that I might marry again."

He laughed, as if she had commended him. "You didn't have to marry again," he told her. "And now it's a nice fix you've got your Yankee dude in."

"Don't dare to speak to me of him, — *you*, —" cried Maris with blazing eyes.

Her anger was reflected dully in him. "I'll speak of who I damn please," he said. "Oh, you're stuck on him. Everybody knows it. Reg'lar cooin' turtle-doves," he sneered. "Well, my lady, it's in your power to keep him."

"You must have come here to discuss Felicia," said Maris, controlling herself by a strong effort. "Are you and Jane prepared to give her up quietly?"

"Not by a long shot," said the man. "And I don't intend to talk about my daughter until we've had out this other matter. He doesn't know the mess he's in yet, I'll bet."

Maris' face showed her disgust. She made no reply, but Martin took the silence for affirmation.

"I knew you wouldn't be in a hurry to give it away," he continued. "Well, to come down to business, how much are you willing to pony up to keep me mum?"

"To keep you, — *what?*" asked Maris. The bewilderment on her face was not to be misinterpreted.

"Mum, — quiet, — mouth shut," said Martin, forcibly, and held his lips pinched together for further demonstration. "I'm not supposin' that you're ready to give up all this," he made a vague gesture about the room, "an' the turtle-dove thrown in, when a small chunk of filthy lucre, — say three hundred per month, — will hold it fast."

As the meaning of his proposition came slowly to her dazed senses, Maris drew back that she might see him better, and let blaze upon him the full scorn of her wonderful eyes. "I did not think this possible, even to you," she said.

For a moment the man was taken aback. Incredible as was his course in the woman's eyes, so to his lower nature was this utter abnegation of happiness and wealth from her. "What else is there for you?" he asked her. "Somebody will tell him."

"I shall tell him, — or else his sister," said Maris. Then her scorn blazed out again. "Did you think for one instant that I would not tell him?" she cried.

"O, you fool — you *fool!*" answered the man with a note of hopelessness. "You always were a fool where your own welfare was concerned. Don't you

see that it is better for everybody to keep this between ourselves? Nobody knows yet but you and me and Jane. Even old Singleterry has seen only Jane, and don't know I'm alive. You're in love with Alden; don't you care enough to keep him out of this muck? Agree to what I am proposing, and Jane and I will slip out quietly, — McGhee threatens to turn us out, anyhow, because of words we had at the bar last night. I'm Winch, — Jim Winch, — nobody knows me as anything else. Martin is good and dead. You've got the papers to show for it." He gave an evil grin. "It's up to you now to straighten out the whole bunch, Lisshy and all, and let Mr. Alden never hear a cheep."

His powers of persuasion had worked on her before. A stealthy side-glance told him that now, too, she was listening. He pressed his advantage eagerly.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "make it three hundred fifty, — per, — what's that to a bloke like Alden? — and I'll throw Lisshy in fer good measure. You can take her over for your own, and no questions asked."

"But what would my husband think?"

Martin stared, then burst into a laugh of triumph. "So you haven't told your Yankee anything!" he cried. "Well, you are in a nice hole and no mistake! But I won't raise my price on you," he added, generously. "Three hundred and fifty, per, — fixed so that I can get it regular, and the game is yours at last. What do you say?"

He leaned back, proud and satisfied. Victory was surely won. A life of ease, even of luxury was his to take. The velvet yielded to his heavy tread, already, when her answer came.

"I say that you are the lowest coward that ever lived, James Martin, and I know what cowardice is,

for I have been one, also. But that is over." She threw back her head, and took a deeper breath. "I love my husband, yes, — and I shall always think of him as my dear husband in the sight of God, for I married him, thinking I was free. And it is true that I have deceived him, even to keeping from him that I had a child. Because of this, comes my great punishment. But, at least, I am done with lying. If you should offer to go away from me this moment, keeping my secret, giving Felicia to me without question or without price, — even if you were dead here, this instant before me, — I should still tell my husband who you were."

"And — and — you fool, — do you think he'd pick you up out of the dirt?" asked the man, as well as he could for rage.

"I scarcely think he would forgive me," said Maris gently. "I could not blame him if he cast me away."

"Then Lisshy, — think of Lisshy, — the child you pretend to care for. If you are thrown off by these Aldens, — what can you do for her?"

"I've thought of that, too," said Maris. "But it must not make the difference."

"You, — you —" began the man, now inarticulate with passion. He beat his hand on the table, and his breath came with a horrible, rasping sound.

"Don't try to speak any more," said Maris, almost compassionately. "You must realize that nothing is going to change me. Oh, I'm sorry for you, — for myself, — and little Felicia most of all," a spasm of pain crossed her face. "But I must be done, forever, with deceptions."

He made an inarticulate sound, and his head drooped forward. "You are surely ill," cried Maris. "Shall I not ring for help?"

"No, — no," he gasped. "Don't ring. There's something yet to say."

She waited in pitying silence.

"If, by any queer chance, — it was me who wasn't the legal husband, and Alden was, — I'm all right, don't you worry. It's only for argument, — but if I was the fake and could prove it, — would — would you pay up handsome fer — Lisshy?"

Maris hesitated before she answered. "If what you suggest could be true, it would bring me nearer to happiness than I ever thought to be again. Of course it isn't, — I know that," she interpolated, at a growl and gesture from the man. "Dr. Singleterry married us, and he would have been sure."

"But suppose, — just for argument, —" the man persisted.

"I would still tell Mr. Alden."

Martin with difficulty regained his feet. "Well, I'm done with you," he said. "You're too big a fool to reason with. Fortunately I have a few more irons in the fire."

He turned to her in a new flare of anger. "Damn you," he cried, "here you are in silk and velvet, livin' on the fat of the land. You can afford virtue and fine words. Come share my kennel for a day or two —" he broke off, dazed with a new, malicious possibility. "And, by God, that's what you *shall* do!" he cried. "If you're so determined to be Mrs. James Martin, we'll go the whole length. Jane can pack. You're better looking, and fatter, too." He lurched forward, seizing her arm. "Well, Mrs. Martin, will you come home now, or shall I send back my coach and four for you?"

Maris did not flinch. She hardly moved. Only her head was slightly turned, and she glanced down at

his hand as if it were a toad. "You know I'm not in the least afraid of you," she said.

"Not in your fine house, with niggers to call on," said the man, furious that he could not cow her. "But I've got other irons in the fire. I'll bring you to terms yet, through Lisshy. Oho, that makes you catch your breath, does it, — that makes you turn white!"

"Surely a helpless and a suffering child, — your own —" whispered Maris, trying to find one hint of mercy in the bloated face.

"Just what I say," he echoed. "A helpless and a suffering child, — your own, and you with the power to save her with a word. Do you back off yet?"

"For her sake, too, she must not be saved through further lies," said the miserable woman. "God will help us, — He will show us a way."

Martin shrugged. "I can't see that He has been putting Himself out for you. Well, I'll go now. Here's your last chance." He paused, watching keenly the agonized struggle in her face. "You shall never set eyes on that kid again, you know, until you have come to terms. Do you agree to my modest proposition?"

"God help me, — *no!*" cried Maris. "Now go at once, before I call my servants to put you out."

She stumbled back into the library, flung herself into the nearest chair, and cowered down, with tightly shut eyes, and hands pressed over her ears, until the last echo of his footsteps should have passed. Then she crept up the marble stairs again to the little dressing-room that seemed, now, her only shelter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHAT PITY WAS AKIN TO

WHEN Ruth had started forth, impulsively, on an early morning walk, it had not been solely for the desirable fresh air and exercise. The thought of Lisshy would not leave her mind; and she now wished to get into telephonic communication with Dr. Page in order to ascertain his opinions and his intentions for the day concerning his new, small patient. In ordinary professional courtesy, he would give over the case to the now returned and very sheepish mill doctor, a raw country youth of scant medical training, whose position was one of the numerous benefactions of Buck McGhee, and who was said in county gossip to be a souvenir, so to speak, of a past flirtation with the doctor's pretty sister.

Naturally the Aldens had not been enlightened as to this unsavory rumor, but, apart from it, incompetency had stamped itself on the practitioner's round red face, and hung in his shifting eye. If Lisshy were to live at all, it would be necessary for Harvey Page to continue his skilful treatment.

Mr. Alden, in his hurried departure, had had no time for a personal interview with McGhee, but he had deputed Ruth to be the bearer of a message that Page was to have full access to the child, and his orders were to be obeyed. "And I'll see that they are obeyed," was Ruth's spirited remark to this.

She had descended the hill and had now reached the sole emporium of the neighborhood, a drug store, one of those indispensable social outposts to a small town where candy and stamps as well as drugs are sold, where neighbors stop for an exchange of lengthy personal opinions, and the telephone booth stands wide to every visitor. Of its many advantages, the fact that it remained open "Sundays," as well as upon days of the week, was not its least.

Ruth's call found Dr. Page still at the hotel, having not quite finished a late breakfast. In answer to Ruth's direct question as to when he expected to start for Red Village he hesitated, cleared his throat, and muttered something about "regular mill doctor," and "professional etiquette."

"Bosh!" cried Ruth, reckless of the drug clerk's ears. "That person is no doctor. He doesn't know an intra canalicular splint from a crochet needle. My brother asks you, as a personal favor to us, to keep the case."

"Oh," answered Harvey, with audible relief. "If that's how the matter stands! I want to keep the case the worst in the world, you know. I have never had such a remarkable one."

"Then we may consider this part settled," the girl announced, in her quick, decided way. "There is one other thing —" she hesitated a fraction of a minute, then hurried on: "I, also, am deeply interested. I would like to go over there with you, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" was all the other voice said, but the joy of it thrilled through the feet of all the wire-perched sparrows from "Putnam's" to "Healy's Drug Emporium."

"Can't you manage to drive Dwight's motor-car, so we can leave that smirking French effigy at home?"

was Ruth's next question. By this uncomplimentary remark she meant the chauffeur.

"Packard? Sure thing!"

"Then come for me just as soon as you are ready."

As a sort of afterword of caution, Ruth added: "I think there is little doubt we can have the car. My sister-in-law will scarcely be using it. She was not well enough to come down to breakfast."

"If we cannot, there are plenty of buggies to hire," said Harvey. Clearly he did not intend to be cheated of his ride.

Ruth walked home briskly, her head well up. She had the long swinging stride of an impudent college boy, softened, by femininity, into grace. So might have walked Rosalind in Arden. She seemed quite anxious to reach home. Her eyes were dark and bright, and her face, all womanly now that the tiny dimple at the corner of her mouth was having exercise, seemed about to break into a more definite smile. Then suddenly it sobered, and she drew a short, impatient sigh. This meant that she thought of Maris, or rather, the necessity of speaking Maris' name to Harvey Page.

For Ruth had never been quite satisfied. She could not say that she doubted what Page had told her of his past fancy; she did not, in her heart, accuse Maris of withholding any facts which might have given more light. Her quarrel was with herself, and might be stated as a subtle fear that she had not drawn all possible inferences. It was a matter upon which she could scarcely question either participant. Indeed, from Maris she desired no further allusion to the past. To follow the visionary clue backward through Harvey's consciousness would presuppose a relationship much closer than any she could have granted without an un-

challenged faith. She was in a fast closed circle and knew it.

She threw back her chin, shook her head, snapped energetic finger-tips and said, aloud: "Ruth Alden, you are a silly woman, after all!" but even this heroic treatment brought little satisfaction.

Now, as if for antidote, she turned again to thoughts of Lisshy. Until this journey to the South, Ruth's philanthropy had been theoretical, rather than concrete. Her creed spoke loftily of "The Child." To this embodied class she had given deep thought, and what she called pity. For it she had joined Associations, helped to plan Schools, and Playgrounds, and was even now working out new possibilities of good. But always it was for "The Child." Now for the first time she had come face to face with the misery of an individual child, just one uncomplaining, heart-rending waif of life; and cords of a hitherto unsuspected tenderness, — the latent motherhood that is in all good women, — stirred in the intellectual soul of Ruth.

The image of Lisshy's small, bloodless face was still vivid as she reached the Brattle house, and was informed by the obsequious Poline, that "Miss Maris wants to see you just as soon as you get back."

Ruth was frowning slightly as she went up the stairs. Of course she would not hesitate to grant such a request, but then, on the other hand, one never knew what was to happen next with Maris.

When, however, she had opened the door to the other's "Come," and caught her first glimpse of Maris' face, pity and apprehension put all selfish thoughts to flight.

"Why, Maris! You are ill, — dreadfully ill! Why did you let Dwight —"

Maris interrupted by a gesture. "Really I'm not,

— though I know I look terrific. But come closer to me. Sit down. I must tell you something. I must tell it in my own way. It won't be very long."

Ruth, still thoroughly frightened, obeyed without question. Maris had received her in the small dressing-room, which was, by this, in perfect order. Besides the long couch, there was but a single chair, an upright one, usually placed before the dressing-table. It was to this that Maris had pointed, and she made no apology for its discomfort. Her look and manner were those of one possessed of an awful knowledge, and desiring to be rid of it. Ruth felt by instinct that it was no light thing, — no explanations of a possible or impossible love-affair, but some terrific yielding-up of self, after which things could never be the same. She sat quietly waiting until Maris could find the words to speak.

The one window stood wide. Maris, though not rising from her sitting posture on the couch, leaned forward, and stared out toward the great rise of Red Horse Hill, and the smoke-stained sky above it. Then she drew a long, long breath that turned into a shudder as it reached her heart. She fixed her eyes on Ruth, and all she could say at first was "Ruth, — Ruth!"

The Northern woman, trained to such observation, noted the spasmodic gestures of head and limbs, and the blue-black circles under the eyes, telling of great pain, not only of mind but of body. She reproached herself now, — although to Maris her face seemed devoid of all emotion, — that she had let her brother leave the city until one or the other of them had seen Maris.

"It is a terrible thing that I must tell you, Ruth. Oh, you will hate me! If it were not that Dwight must know, — I could spare you —"

"Just try to keep all question of personality out of it," said Ruth, encouragingly. "If it is something that you want me to know, — if it is best either for your sake or for Dwight's that I should know, — just try to tell it as if we all were strangers."

"Yes, that is a good way," said Maris, moistening her dry lips. "That helps me. It is like a cool hand on one's forehead. I'll tell you everything, — but you must not interrupt, — you must not question. I must tell it my own way."

"Yes, dear," said Ruth. "You shall tell it exactly as you wish."

"You are good, Ruth. I'm sorry that you must hate me. Turn your face away a little, — to the window. Watch where black factory smoke rises as I speak."

Ruth turned without remonstrance, and, almost on the instant, the low torrent of words began. Maris kept back nothing. Her manner was never less dramatic. She made no gestures. Her voice would have been monotonous in its low, regular succession of vowel sounds, but for the directness and terrible sincerity of the things she was saying. There was absolutely no attempt to palliate her wrong-doing, or to gather sympathy. Once only Ruth forgot her promise not to interrupt. "So Dr. Page knew you had been married. And that was the reason —"

"Yes, yes, — that was the reason of my excitement when I knew he was your friend. But he is not important," said the other, as if in terror that she should be stopped.

"But Lisshy, — does he know *that*?" Ruth cried.

"Not yet, — I have not seen him. But he will know, — everybody will know — Oh, it's for her sake, and to make it just a little easier for Dwight, that I inflict this misery on you."

"Never mind me," said Ruth. "Go on with it."

"I pretended to be ill last night, knowing that, as soon as the house was quiet, I would slip away and go to my baby."

"You went there, — over that hill, — on foot, last night?"

"Why, of course. What of it?"

"O, nothing, — it was natural, to be sure. Only I am beginning to understand why you show such bodily pain, — why you are feverish. I won't interrupt again unless you ask it."

As Maris went on with an account of her interview with Lisshy, Ruth slowly turned back to the window, and set her eyes upon the high hilltop.

When Maris told of the man Winch, and his identity with Martin, she hid her face, for the first time, in shame, and the next words failed to come. After a pause she dropped her hand, sat upright again, and dared to glance toward Ruth. The latter was posed as if carved in wood. Even her breathing was hushed. Maris had shivered inwardly at the thought of what Ruth might be going to say. She was thankful now, for all her courage, that Ruth did not speak just yet.

She went on, just a little wearily, to tell of Martin's intrusion, scarcely an hour before, and the propositions and threats that he had made. Her listless tone said that these were not, after all, of much importance, that something of the kind was to have been expected.

Ruth had listened keenly throughout. Now she seemed to vibrate with intensity. Still with averted face, she asked: "May I speak here, for a moment?"

"Why, yes," said Maris, "as much as you will. I've told you practically all."

"Well," began Ruth, "what that man said to

you was absolutely true. By paying him a reasonable sum of money each month, — and you could easily get it from Dwight who adores you, — the whole affair could be kept perfectly quiet."

Maris could only gasp. She doubted whether she had heard correctly. Yet Ruth's words had been clear and crisp, like hail.

"Would you have advised me to do as he said?" she managed to ask, at length.

"Why not? You have deceived my brother all along, — when you had not so much to gain by it or he to lose."

Maris again sat silent, trying to repeat these amazing words. She was trying to be sure that she caught their meaning, — so much had dazed and troubled her of late. But there was no mistaking the words, or Ruth's calm, unconcerned attitude, as she sat, in profile, stiffly in the gilt chair. When at length, Maris attempted to answer, it was with a hanging head, and apologetic air. "Everything I do seems wrong," she said, "even when I am most sure it is right. If I had thought that I ought to submit to this for — Dwight, I suppose I could have managed to bear my own shameful part. I could have gone on acting, and deceiving and being treacherous, — but, — somehow, —"

"Well," said Ruth coldly.

"Oh," cried the other, with the first ring of passion in her voice. "You can't understand, because you don't love anybody. It is because of what I feel for Dwight. Apart from Felicia and her rescue, — because I adore your brother —" She paused, thinking she heard a sound of derision from the girl.

"Of course, from your standpoint, you believe that I am not capable of love, — but what shall I call it? If you are perishing by flame, — who stops

to think what kindled it? I tell you I adore my husband. The love I had when he first married me was nothing, — nothing, — to the great love that consumes me now. If any suffering of mine, — if death by slow torture could take away even a little part of the degradation I have put on him, — and on you, Ruth, — it would be something to thank heaven for. But I am caught in a trap. I cannot die because I've found Felicia, and she needs me. She must be saved; she has never done wrong. Oh, Ruth, I know it is too much to hope for, but if you could just advise me a little about Felicia, — just as if she were not my child! But of course you can't do that. You hate and scorn me, and because of me will cast her off."

"Have you made any plans?" asked Ruth.

"No, nothing is clear to me yet. But I have thought, as well as my dazed mind will let me, that perhaps you could make me out, to Dwight, even a worse woman than I am. Let him think me utterly cruel and unloving, — tell him, — tell him, — that I never really loved him, — and only pretended, for my own advantage, — tell him such cruel things that his hatred of me will keep his love from hurting, — for he does love me. Don't you think that perhaps that would help him, just a little?"

Ruth shook her head. "No," she said, "that would not help." Something round and glittering, like a drop of light, had fallen. Could Ruth, the self-controlled, be weeping? After all, she was a woman, and this brother the dearest thing on earth. Maris had been prepared for scorn, reproaches, loathing, but not for tears. That one bright drop seared deeper than any heated phrase. In the hurt of it, Maris sprang to her feet.

"You are crying for him, — you have the right

to, — and I, — why I haven't even that! Oh, God of the friendless," she broke out, almost frenzied now with her long constraint, "have mercy on me and give me all the suffering! My husband, — yes, I will say it. He is my husband in the sight of God. I took him, believing myself free. I love him. I shall always love him, no matter how wicked you and Dr. Singleterry think me. O God, make it easier for Dwight!"

She began pacing up and down, but not rhythmically, rather in disjointed starts, and checking of the steps, as if at every turn were a spear-point. Ruth's quiet attitude began to fret her. "I've told you everything, Ruth. Why don't you go? You will want to get away from such a thing as I. Go to your own room, — it is clean and pure and empty, like your heart. Go there, and weep for Dwight."

Ruth came to Maris and put her arms about her. "My tears are for you, Maris, not for Dwight. Don't draw back from me, dear. I mean it. I pity you, — there is no hate. I shall help you to the very limit of my powers."

But Maris could not believe. She swerved as far away as Ruth's constraining arms allowed, and put her hand against the girl's breast, while the dark, wild eyes searched piteously the drowned gray eyes of Ruth.

"You don't hate me! You will help me, — you!"

"Yes, you and Felicia. Dwight is a man and knows how to bear his burdens. You need me more."

"I can't believe it. I can't believe it! Ruth to be my friend!"

"Come back to the couch, dear. You are trembling so that you can scarcely keep your feet. When you grow quieter, I can help you plan."

She followed automatically, and let Ruth seat her on the couch and then bathe her forehead and temples with cologne. All the while she was studying Ruth's face, as though it were a stranger's.

"Now, isn't that better?" said the girl brightly, when a hint of color began to creep back to Maris' cheeks.

Instead of answering directly, Maris caught her free hand and pressed it to her lips. "I could have borne anger, — even cruelty from you, Ruth," she whispered, "but I think your kindness is going to break my heart."

"Nonsense," said Ruth, "we haven't got time to think of hearts and souls, — it's Lisshy's poor little starved body that must be saved."

As a result of the first brief conference, it was decided that Maris should not attempt to go to the Winch cottage, or hold any communication with its inmates until Ruth and Dr. Page should have made their visit.

"And I shall give them no hint as yet, — the beasts, — that I am in your confidence," said Ruth, with decision. Now that the first shock of Maris' revelation was past, she began to feel something like excitement in a situation so intense. Maris already leaned heavily on her judgment. Ruth's straight brows were knit, the smooth forehead wrinkled with perplexities, when a double interruption came. "Dr. Page, askin' for Miss Alden," Poline announced. At the same time she gave Maris a note just delivered by one of the rectory servants.

Maris waited until the negress had left the room, then beckoned Ruth to stay, until she had read. Silently she handed over the note. It was from Dr. Singleterry.

"MY POOR MARIS: I have thought of little but your new tragedy, and its relation to the larger tragedy from which the material prosperity of this, and similar communities, arises. Surely you have digged a pit for yourself and have fallen into the midst of it. In a strange sense, your follies and their result have been instrumental in deciding my own course. This will be the last sermon I am to preach in Sidon, — perhaps the last in any place. I wish you to be present. Do not speak yet of my intended resignation. I shall announce it from the pulpit. Health and my now irrevocable convictions demand that I make public withdrawal. I am too old. The sorrows of little children bear heavily upon me, day and night. Perhaps I shall again find peace in my Orbury garden, though something whispers that I am never to see that Promised Land again. It is there, at least, where I would wish my tired frame to rest. God help and comfort you, Maris. After this day I shall be free to serve you and Felicia with an undivided heart. I long for the hour of my deliverance.

"MARK SINGLETERRY."

"Are you well enough?" was Ruth's practical question.

"Yes, for you have given me new life, Ruth."

"Of course you will take the motor-car?"

"What! For that tiny distance. The walking will do me good."

Ruth, after a moment's grave cogitation, saw the truth of this and nodded her consent. "Well, I will go put on my hat," she said, turning toward the door.

"O, Ruth, Ruth!" cried Maris, running after her. But when the girl's hands were fast, and the gray eyes on her own, no words would come.

"Now, that's all right!" said the girl, flushed a little, but giving her good-comrade smile. "I'm going to talk the whole thing over with Dr. Page, as you wish. He'll be sure to give us some good suggestions." How sweet was that small word "Us"!

"Ruth! You didn't really mean that I should have agreed to Martin's bribery?"

"No, you dear goose. I was only testing you."

"Well, I suppose you must go," said Maris, sighing. "I can hardly bear to let you out of my sight, — but, — go."

"It is to Felicia," said Ruth, with a beautiful light in her eyes.

"Perhaps it is to Love, as well," thought Maris, noting the new tenderness, but she was too wise to say it.

The first church bell began to ring. There was no time to lose. She locked the door, and began the mechanical process of dressing. In some way, the very familiarity of the motions helped her. Hope, that immortal spring, was moistening her dry heart. She was almost cheerful as she dressed for church.

Ruth's toilet had been more quickly made. A sailor hat, fastened on by two long silver hat-pins, thrust slowly, each exactly in the centre of a side, in holes reserved for them, a light chiffon veil, gloves, and a tan jacket put on over her neat shirt waist and skirt, completed it. She ran down-stairs to find Harvey waiting in the hall.

"Can we have the car?" he asked.

"Yes. Archer can bring it around. The chauffeur isn't out of bed, it seems."

"All right. Archer!" This latter word in a loud call.

Archer's white teeth appeared, escorting the duskier part of him. "Yassir."

The order was given. Four more teeth were immediately disclosed. "But don't blow yourself up," Ruth warned, laughing. The teeth retreated.

"Nome," said Archer.

"Ought, shall I — try to see Mrs. Alden?" Harvey asked, when they were alone once more.

"No, she's much better. She's dressing now for church."

The doctor looked puzzled, but, as Maris was never a favorite topic of conversation, he was glad enough not to pursue it, or her.

With his honest love for Ruth he resented more deeply, each day, her enforced intimacy with a woman whose very presence seemed to him something in the nature of contamination.

The young physician's constant and eager application to the science of bodily healing had left little time for the exercise of mere sympathy. Surgery was his passion, and he would have told you that he put more trust in the perfect edge of a scalpel than in mawkish sentiment. His experience with Maris had undoubtedly heightened the touch of cynicism latent in a nature otherwise bright and normal. His present love affair did not promise to soften him. Loving Ruth was little less of an abstraction than loving Science herself. The worst of it was that this comparison would greatly please Ruth did she hear it.

Possibly because of these two extremes of feminine nature which it had been his fortune (good or ill), to touch, Page's estimate of woman was utterly without gradations. Either she was good and honorable, like his chilly Ruth, or, — she was the other thing. He made little or no excuse for the strength of a temptation. Unmerited misfortune did, indeed,

evoke from him compassion. The unhappy marriage and the wrongs which Maris, in her one outburst of confidence had disclosed, stirred him to the depths, and fired his boyish heart with the desire to help her, to help search for the lost child, and punish the inhuman abductors. But the fact that Maris had told him such a thing, and had continued to accept his love and homage while continuing to encourage the attentions of another man, seemed a treachery too black for pardon.

"There is the car at last. Archer did manage it! Why, what are you scowling at so fiercely?" Ruth, at his elbow, had fired these three remarks, with jerky intervals between, before he came out of his unpleasant reverie, and could turn to her an unclouded face. The girl shot him one keen glance that seemed to say, "I have an idea!" then hurried on before him to the gate. It was not until they were seated, and Harvey had the machine well under control, that Ruth next spoke.

"It is absolutely imperative that you keep up your treatment of Lisshy. There are reasons you don't yet know."

"The difficulty of the case itself would be enough for me," said Harvey, "provided your brother makes things straight with the local sawbones. These small practitioners are very touchy about their so called dignity."

"Even when just brought back from a fishing expedition," whipped in scornful Ruth.

He laughed, and a minute after turned with some deliberation, to stare at her. There was in Ruth's voice this morning a young quality that made it very sweet. He noted, now, that her flushed face matched the voice. There was a thrill in both, and Harvey's heart lost no time in answering.

"I say," he exclaimed, "wish this was going to be a long jolly ride in the country, instead of shop."

"But it is shop, as you so gracefully call it," said his companion. "And for my part we cannot get to the Winches' cottage too soon."

This was cold water in the face. Page took it without a shiver.

"Tell me," said Ruth, leaning concessively nearer, "what is your real opinion of Lisshy's case?"

"I can tell you better when I have seen her."

"What a bromide! Of course. But I meant, as you have been thinking it over?"

"A surgeon doesn't think things over," declared young Dr. Page, partly for the fun of teasing her. "He does things while he's there, — goes off again, — and when he comes back, inspects results."

"That harangue is both bromidic and pompous. I'm surprised at you," rejoined Ruth, and elevated a dainty profile. But she knew how to bring him about. "I predict that you find your patient much better than you could have hoped for. There was some one with her most of the night, — a ministering angel, so to speak, — in spite of what those fiends she calls her parents, said to us."

"How did you manage it?" asked the other, ingenuously. The word "angel" had, evidently, but a single connotation in his mind. Ruth gave a girlish laugh. "I did not even try. It was — Maris."

Now laughter died from both. For a moment Harvey stared, with parted lips. The machine took advantage of the interlude to skirt a small, incipient gully. It wasn't a deep one, and if they had gone in, the danger was not great, still it served to recall the amateur chauffeur to a sense of present responsibility.

"Mrs. Alden, — your brother's wife, — went to

that cottage?" he repeated, as if to himself, when again they were on clear ground.

"Yes, — secretly, on foot in the night, — there and back. It must have been a dreadful experience. I did not know of it when I telephoned and spoke so lightly of her illness. Oh, she was a bloodless ghost when I first saw her."

"But she has gone to church." Harvey's dry tone said plainly that nothing very important could have been the matter.

"Yes, but that was after her long talk with me. She said I had helped her. I think I did help a little. Poor soul, — poor soul."

Harvey did not attempt to answer this. He did not intend to be drawn into open expressions of sympathy with this woman, especially when he did not know what it was all about.

Ruth stared straight forward to the patch of ever-ascending red clay road. Harvey was busied, now, with the steering gear. The outskirts of the strip of forest, grass, flowering weeds and scrub, already edged their road. Ruth's next impulsive utterance, "I shall never be thankful enough you didn't amputate," seemed, on the instant, quite irrelevant, but it gave Harvey his first clue. His brows came fiercely together, a dull red, as of anger, spread over his fair cheek and throat, and tinged, for a passing moment, even the hands upon the wheel, but he controlled the incipient outburst. Deliberately he kept silence until the wood was reached. Here he slackened speed. The thick sand under the rubber tires deadened all sound. Now turning squarely to his companion Harvey said: "Tell me exactly what you have heard."

Ruth told him and he listened stolidly. No sign or exclamation came from him until he learned that,

after all, Martin was not dead, when a thick sound, like a strangled oath, burst from his closed lips. At Ruth's startled look he caught himself back into sternness, and said: "Go on. I am listening. I'll not break in again."

Perhaps because of Maris' shame, perhaps because of the new steadiness, the implacability of Harvey's blue-gray eyes, Ruth was less impersonal than she would have liked to be. More than once both voice and look faltered before the frowning gaze. The pity she had hoped for did not come into his face. It was almost that of a stranger.

"She had no right to try to draw a pure woman into her own mire," was his remark, when Ruth had finished. "It was simply infamous."

Ruth shrank a little. She had not expected this. To her own astonishment she rather liked the note of mastery in his voice, the assumption of protection of herself. But this was not for Harvey to know. She chose indignation for an armor.

"But think what she is suffering. This is no time to analyze her faults. If you have a heart at all you must pity her, and Lisshy."

"She brought it on herself."

Ruth's eyes flashed. This time there was no pretence. "Don't ever again dare to call me cold," she cried. "Why, you are a regular New England witch-burner!"

"You say she told you everything, — including her confidence to me at the Hospital?"

Ruth nodded, and looked out at a bush of flowering rattle-box beside the road.

"Then you understand why —"

"Yes, I understand it all," she broke in, more suddenly than would seem necessary. To her distress, a warm flood of crimson rushed to her face.

She could feel how it burned, and glowed in the right ear nearest him. This sight did for the listener what all of Maris' tragedy had failed to do.

"At least you are not always cold to a woman's suffering, whatever you may be to a man's," said Harvey, with a peculiar intonation.

Ruth caught her breath. A faint chilliness, followed by an inexplicable fluttering, possessed her heart. She had never before experienced such sensations. Could it be possible that she, an assistant professor at Wellesley, was afraid of a mere man! Humiliating suggestion! And yet the flutterings increased.

What might the mere man do next? Ruth longed to tuck her bare hands under the lap robe. Mere men, she had been told, were capable of strange familiarities when making love. And how was he looking at her?

Ruth could not forbear a glimpse in his direction. He was peering, in the most ordinary manner, straight before him. A glittering white spray of dog-wood slanted downward a hundred yards ahead.

Ruth leaned back, feeling, all at once, both disconcerted and rebuffed. Perhaps after all he had not intended to make love. So much the better. She had no thought or interest to give, just now, to trivial matters, but she admitted herself to be deeply disappointed that he had not offered to help her with Maris. Perhaps he, like herself, cared only for impersonal things. Still he might have a little human pity.

She smoothed the lap robe now quite calmly. No need at all of secreting her hands. What a fine morning it was. She had not noticed it before. The dog-wood was swiftly drawing closer. She turned to her companion, thinking to make some casual remark

about the day, when, to her surprise, she found her lips trembling so that she could not speak. An extraordinary obstacle had caught in her slender throat, and seemed to be distending, so that the pressure was acute pain. Tears rushed to her eyes, and she turned away from Harvey in troubled, sweet confusion. He must have been watching her all along, and only pretended oblivion when she glanced at him.

"Ruth, Ruth!" he cried, and now there was no need to speculate as to what was in his voice. "I pity the poor soul as you do, and I'll help to the best of my power, for through her I have gained what I have despaired of, — the dear girl I love."

Ruth tried to withdraw the shaking hands which, a moment before, had been so cool and confident; she strove to protest, and to reassert her determination to live the intellectual life; but her heart was already too deeply stirred. The whole universe began to spin slowly about her in streaks of dark green shadow, and new constellations, made up of dog-wood flowers, spangled the whirling dusk.

In another moment she was in his arms, and, faint with a delicious terror, felt his first kiss on her lips.


CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IN WHICH THE CONGREGATION LISTENS

THE second clamor of church bells rang pleasantly against Maris' big window-panes. By starting at once she would be able to reach the place before the opening of service; and this was her desire.

In order to avoid any theatrical effect of sorrow to which the gossips of the town might afterward refer, she had dressed herself much as usual, wearing a blue silk gown beautifully trimmed with lace and with delicate hints of gold embroidery. Her wide blue hat bore a superb aigrette of heron's plumes. If any excess was to be noted, it lay in the unusual thickness of her white lace veil through the meshes of which her features were mistily obscure.

Arriving, she took her seat in the farther corner of the Brattle pew, knelt for the conventional moment, and again sat upright, putting her veil up upon the front brim of her hat, though still it fell at each side, making a sort of diaphanous hood. The quiet, the soft light of the place, that indescribable hush of coming worship which Emerson describes as the best part of church service, touched her sore heart with balm. The clear morning light falling through stained glass windows, seized the heaped, white chancel flowers and whirled them into iridescence. People began to enter in a subdued, continuous rush. Little children, lately from Sunday-school



in the adjoining Chapter-House, switched importantly beside their mothers, or, by permission, went off in tittering groups to alien pews. From these dear images Maris turned suffering eyes. To look calmly upon well-fed, happy children, was just a little more than she could bear. In order to deflect a tide of thought that might have overwhelmed her, she set her gaze steadily upon the dull silver cross that stood in the centre of the altar. Through the rising tears which must now, by any means, remain unshed, the outline of the cross, so poignantly familiar, yet so unchangingly mysterious, began to shiver, slowly to expand, spreading out thinly against the bright flowers, then to grow higher until she had to lift her head to see; and from it now there leaned a shadowy form. She could have stretched her arms and cried aloud to It. All the pent up faith of mediæval centuries surged through her open heart. She knew now what the Symbol meant, even in vulgar, concrete handiwork, to myriads of the unquestioning. She was herself a peasant kneeling at a wayside shrine, an anchorite in a hidden cell.

A new influence, soft, heavenly, caressing, folded her round. It was the organ prelude, feeling its way out slowly toward the light. At first it seemed the low, troubled throbbing of the universal Heart; then hope crept into it, then triumph. She leaned back with a little sigh of blessedness, knowing that her own tortured heart was finding strength to bear. No one watching her could have detected the presence of the unusual. She looked about among the congregation, returning, with slight nod and smile, the cautious salutations of acquaintances.

The prelude passed into an anthem and the choir began to sing. Now men of the church came in, the vestrymen and more active parishioners taking seats,

with some ostentation, in the aisle-ends of the pew; clearing their throats importantly, and busying themselves with the disposal of tall hats and handsome canes. Prosperity exuded from them like an essence. They were the real possessors, the guiding spirits of St. John's and did not care who knew it. The Almighty and His servant, Dr. Singleterry, had some prerogatives, of course, but as a matter of safety the vestrymen kept the controlling interest in their able hands.

The minister entered through the vestry door, walked to the middle of the chancel, and stood looking at his congregation. With her first glance at him Maris realized a change. He looked ill. His face, always pale, was now absolutely bloodless. By all analogies he should have seemed frail and old, yet, on the contrary, his tall form rose like a steady flame, and one felt in him immortality. His eyes met hers for an instant, and dwelt there. She saw in them the echo of his former words: "Agree! Who said I would agree? Some day I will speak, and when I do, my congregation shall listen."

During the remainder of the anthem he stood motionless, but the poise was that of strength and not of lassitude. Before the last note of the organ died away, his voice, with a thrill in it, rang out:

"Woe unto the world because of occasions for stumbling, for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!"

The sleek vestrymen exchanged bewildered glances. This was no usual prefatory verse of scripture. What was the old man thinking of? The first touch of apprehension brushed across silken shoulders and crackled in starched shirt-fronts. And all the time the minister was standing still, — a most un-

conventional length of pause, — searching with wonderful eyes for a soul that still could see. Abruptly he turned, said quickly, "Let us pray," and knelt. Again the congregation rustled, and the soprano in the choir-loft asked an indignant question of the organist. For this was no full litany Sunday. Te Deums and Glorias had been rehearsed, and now, it would seem, were to be discarded. The fattest vestryman, — the senior-warden, — was tapping his forehead, with significant looks toward the minister. The soprano felt consoled. This alone could really explain so grave an error.

Dr. Singleterry, apparently oblivious of the agitation he had produced, went on with the full litany. Few of the listeners had heard those phrases given in such a tone. It was as if, in reality, he thought himself pleading with an unseen father for the follies of naughty children. Some of them refused to give the responses, and sat back stiffly to show their disapproval. Nothing is more obnoxious to a well-bred congregation than a passionate sincerity against which they are not forewarned. It was little less than insulting for this old man to cry aloud, in a voice of agony: "Have mercy upon us, — have mercy upon us!" They did not hear how Maris in her corner whispered: "And let Thy mercy be upon us!"

The senior warden soothed his dignity by composing to-morrow's letter demanding the minister's resignation. It should be politely worded, of course, and the vestry would make him a parting present. In balancing the relative desirability of a Tiffany student's lamp on the one hand, and a silver tea service on the other, the senior warden managed to remain deaf, for some moments, to the disturbing influence of genuine prayer.

But others had not this refuge. Eyes began to fix themselves on the speaker's face, and hearts to stir under his impassioned words. The little children on the front bench listened without self-consciousness. It is one royal prerogative of childhood that it can meet truth unashamed.

Just before announcing the hymn that precedes the sermon, Dr. Singleterry gave to the correct ones yet another shock. "I would like to request," said he, "that, for just this once, the children remain to hear my discourse." He took a few steps forward, smiling down at the row of little ones. "It won't be a long sermon, children," he said to them, "will you stay and listen?" A little girl nodded and smiled back assent. She was the idolized and only child of the senior warden.

When the hymn was well begun, Dr. Singleterry turned slowly and went back to the altar. As he knelt, there were no visible signs of emotion, but Maris felt the concentration of divine appeal. When he rose and came toward his people, his eyes were swords of flame. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!" he cried; then he spoke his text:

"Be not afraid of them that kill the body, yet are not able to kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell!"

Now even the children were alarmed. The smallest among them had been taught that "Hell" was an improper word, especially when spoken with vehemence. Dr. Singleterry seemed to feel the presence of their fear, for he smiled down again upon them, and they relapsed into their former attitudes, huddling against each other like a row of sparrows on a limb. They knew that everything was safe.

He began slowly, and with an apparent effort at

repression. "My friends," he said; then he changed the phrase to "My brethren in Christ." This did not reassure his listeners. It hinted of undue familiarity.

"For the first time in my term of service here," he went on steadily, "I ask leave to speak to you of myself. When I agreed to come to Sidon, leaving for it a community which had seemed to me too prosperous and too unstable for any good which I was capable of giving, I believed that I was entering a field where I could be of great help to the poor, as well as a faithful servant to the rich. You know as well as I what restrictions have, from the first, been put upon my speech. I was not called to spur your consciences, or to interest myself in the methods of your business affairs. What could a white-haired scholar know of modern exigencies, or the responsibilities that wealth may have toward the laborers through whom it comes? Let him speak platitudes, look inspired, and see that his surplice is of the latest cut, — then we are satisfied. To-day I am to give you Christ's view of responsibility, and, in His name, I ask that you will hear me."

He paused, waiting deliberately for the inevitable frowns and murmurs of disapprobation. He reaped the bitter harvest in abundance but without flinching. One man made a motion to rise and leave the church; but the minister watched him calmly, and then said: "My friend, bear with me for this once. I shall not trouble you again."

The children craned their small necks round to see the offender. He stood still, looking a little foolish, until his wife, crimson with anger and mortification, jerked at his coat-sleeve, and made him sit down. Now every one, even the ruffled soprano in

the choir, was listening. The old man's opportunity had come. Years afterward his hearers recalled, — sometimes on occasions least convenient, — stray phrases of that sermon which, like meteors, were kept luminous by their own force. In vain proud women strove to hold their faces set in scorn. In vain plethoric vestrymen jingled their heavy watch-chains and scraped patent leather shoes upon the floor. Each listened, and knew that he must remember.

"For once, if never again," said Dr. Singleterry, "dare to face the possibility of the truth that these people of the mills are your brethren, — your neighbors, — if not to love as well or better than yourselves, at least to treat as sentient human creatures. You call them 'animals.' I have heard the expression often. It is a stock-in-trade among you, and by the use of it you think to shut the door in a stranger's face. But these people are not strangers. In all this land there flows no purer blood than in the starved veins of these poor laborers, taken from our Southern hills, — descendants, all of them, of Puritan, Cavalier or Huguenot, — good English yeomanry, eager for a wider life, — stout Scot and French and genial Irish. Dutch with heritage of thrift, Teuton or Dane, — giants in their time each one of them, strong men who came to hew success from the wilderness, and so leave to their children a more splendid opportunity. Such is the present race that you call 'animals.'"

The audience now sat, arrested. If conscience slumbered, curiosity, at least, and a vague fear were awake.

"You tell me that they are ignorant, immoral, and dirty," he went on a little sadly. "Ignorant, indeed, they are, and have been kept so by the very

isolation that has guaranteed their blood its purity. Perhaps they are immoral. How many of us might not be the same, if brought up amid such surroundings? — and the exigencies of their daily toil do not lend themselves to scrupulous neatness. You are glad enough to take these things on hearsay. How many among you have gone among them that he might give his complacency the test? ”

He looked about for an instant, let the ghost of a smile rest upon his lips, then sighed. “ Not one, I dare say, — certainly not one of you mill owners, who should have been the first to go. Well, I have visited mill people, often with a sense of stealth for which I am ashamed, and can tell you that among the most degenerate there is still found courtesy, and gentleness, and a sweet kindness that puts our cultured pretences to shame.

“ But the old order changes in the South. Perhaps even innate kindness is soon to be lost to them. Prosperity and factories gather in this valley or in that. A new town springs up. The echoes of the great mills reach even to the forests, so that the quiet dwellers pause, and ask themselves the meaning. You send your agents out for ‘ hands,’ bribing them with fair promises. You inoculate them with their first lust of gold; and when the farm is abandoned, the cattle sold, and they must starve but for the pittance you dole out, you can take advantage of their wretchedness, condemning them to a slavery worse than any the South has known. We look with pitying toleration upon the negro as one of an incalculably lower state. Yet there is no small dusky vagrant asleep in the sun, no group of toilers hoeing reluctantly in spring cotton fields or gathering its fleecy whiteness in the fall, whose lot is not enviable beside that of our Anglo-Saxon children of the mills.”

He paused again. The black looks among his vestry had no power to disturb him. No one, he knew, would leave until he had finished.

"It is not true that these poor neighbors care neither for education nor freedom, or would not care if they once realized the meaning of the words. But first of all they must have food. You and your agents say: 'We keep within our bond. If these people can not keep their share of the agreement, it cancels our responsibility.' You will say this, I know, and make yourselves believe that you are justified, even though, at the time of bargaining, you knew that you were tricking them. You speculate in human endurance, and make trade competition in terms of starving flesh. In every other enterprise where ignorant labor is involved, the Law protects the poor, the weak, and ignorant from the very disadvantages of their own acts. We legislate against railroads and restrict monopolies. We are clamorous against underselling, and punish high officials for rebates; but who has risen to protest against mill owners who let children of eight compete for wages against their own fathers and mothers?

"What I speak now I speak more directly to men and women of the South. If these abuses continue it is to our shame, and is far less the fault of Northern manufacturers than our own. It is the land we love, and the making of its laws are ours. A little sisterhood of brave women,—and may God strengthen them each day!—is already battling for the right, though often it is true that their bitterest opponents are fathers and brothers of their own blood. Laws are already passed which you men not only wink at as dead letters, but connive to overthrow. You managers jest at the timidity of inspectors, and some of your state officials,—mill

owners like yourselves, — deliberately paralyze the laws you swore to execute.

“ Oh, you men! You blind ones! If there is no mercy in you, no sense of brotherhood with God’s poor, have you not, at least, foresight and intelligence? This is a question not alone of the humanity you desecrate, but of the cherished dollars that should come, not only in your day, but to the successors of your class. For the country’s sake, its children must be saved. Will you cut the young trees down and then expect a forest, or pluck green fruit, and then keep harvest-home?

“ And not only their bodies, — those frail anæmic shells, — are being destroyed, but their souls, too must sicken and, — perhaps, — perish. What else may we expect from the physical conditions that now exist? Almost from babyhood the small features, nerves, and muscles are being set, — hardened as in petrification, — to some single paltry end; and the answering faculties of mind must slowly atrophy through disuse. If you dared watch them you could tell the little victims at a glance, branded as truly as the alcoholic debauchee. There is a baby girl of six, starting her lifelong slavery at the spooling-frame. Her eyes dart like bright shuttles from one revolving bobbin to the next. Her right hand is curved for an instantaneous pounce among the hissing threads. Soon the posture of the claw-like fingers will be fixed, tortured to malformation as surely as the cramped feet of a Chinese girl. After the long day’s work is over, there is no home fireside to which she can creep for rest. Her parents, too, have worked in the mill, and reel home, sodden with fatigue. The bad food, badly cooked, can hardly be forced down. Each creeps to the heap of filthy rags he calls a bed, there to sleep, still in the soiled mill clothes, — like

an exhausted dog until the first scream of the morning's mill whistle. Perhaps it is because of such necessities you call them 'animals.'

"Yonder, creeping like a shadow against a mildewed wall, I see a woman. She is just forty. An interesting age among the rich, a full-blown rose, forsooth, yielding completeness of perfume. It is not so with her. She might be seventy. The thin, stooped shoulders lean even in sleep toward her 'drawing-in' frame. Her bleared eyes, with their red lids, stare always just before her into the fibre-comb of threads. Her right hand seems to lift the slender steel hook with which, for the chief part of her conscious existence, she must draw in the woof-thread through the warp, that the white cloth we use may have a pleasant surface. Yet she has compensations. She is an expert. The overseer himself will tell you so. Having for thirty years transferred the very essence of her being to the loom, she commands large wages, one dollar and seventy cents a day. Is it not a sum to smile at? Out of it must come food, — bacon and meal, — dried apples, beans and coffee. She pays rent to the mill, taxes to its appointed doctor, taxes to the town. She lights her hut with it and buys the family medicine, — for these people are always ill. And she is to know nothing else but this sordid round, until she drops into an unmarked grave.

" 'But,' you protest, 'are we to assume and stagger under all the oppression of all our Southern poor? Cloth must be made, and there is no machinery as yet to take the place of the patient drawer-in.'

"This has some truth in it, but it is not all true. Each year, — I might say, each month, — shows us some new, mechanical device for the lightening

of mill labor. At the North these are eagerly welcomed, tested at once, and if they prove satisfactory, installed. Is it so here? Or rather do we not buy up the old machinery because we have found that tender flesh and blood is cheaper than good steel! You wilfully ignore, for what you think your gain, all that science and mercy would do in such experiment. Because of your blindness, the quality of Southern manufactures is lower than at the North, and the disparity in selling price continually on the increase. It is not too late to remedy this part of the evil. Advanced machinery is still to be bought, honest inspectors are to be hired and existing laws enforced. The limit of age for working children here is twelve. It should be fourteen, but babes of six and eight troop daily to your mills. There is the figment of a school law. This should be stern, compulsory, and the school be made a place where the children long to go, — not a square cage for parrot-learning, — the cramped minds cannot bear, all at once, an abstract discipline. The normal effort is of hand and brain together. Let them begin like a small primitive race of men, to hew and dig and fashion substances. Oh, you will find the little artists keen. Teach them sweet songs in chorus, teach them to play, — they have never learned to play."

His voice shook slightly. He cleared his throat to recover it. Maris, in her pew-corner, raised her hand, and with a swift gesture pulled down the white lace veil about her face.

"Give to the parents more attractive homes," the speaker went on pleading. "Lighten their hours of toil and give them juster wages. Profit will return to you, in time, with better work, and a higher grade of manufacture. A restaurant to each mill, where nourishing food may be given to the laborers

at a small cost, will be a sound financial investment. It has been tried at other places, always with success. The improvement in the quality of the mill products alone would repay it, and gradually take away from the South the reproach that in grade of workmanship her goods are far inferior to the North. Is it not, at least, worth the attempt? "

Suddenly the eager look on his face was shattered into pain. He gave a little cry and pressed his hand above his heart. The congregation watched with indrawn breath. Now, by a supreme effort he recovered, giving a gesture that showed how he still wished to speak. When he could do so the smile came back to his lips, and he leaned far over to the row of children near him. His words came clearly.

"What is more beautiful than childhood! 'Trailing clouds of glory do they come, from God, who is their home.' So is it with these happy little ones, and all can see their glory. But with the mill children it is not glory, but a cross, that each one trails, — a child's cross! Think of that! Even our Saviour was not asked to bear his cross until he was a man. Oh, children — you happy, cared-for children!" he cried aloud, watching their upturned faces, "listen well to what I am saying, for never on earth again perhaps will just such a message be allowed to come to you. Christ was a child of the poor. He played in the shadow of Joseph's shed, and Joseph was a common carpenter! Perhaps the Christ child had His little game of blocks, caught from the chips and refuse of His foster-father's toil. The bright sun shone on Him, and in the doorway waited His young mother's smile. But over yonder, in the valley beyond the crest of Red Horse Hill," here he pointed out, dramatically, "live many children who have not known

even such humble play. There are boys who never saw a picture book or knew what it meant to own a real toy; and little girls who may have dreamed of dolls, but surely never clasped one. Not a child down there on the bench before me, — and God love your flower-like faces! — is younger than the youngest mill child. They cannot go to school for they must work. Many have never been into a church, or heard the sound of prayer. Remember all these things that I am saying," he repeated, in a voice of such intense earnestness that the smallest girl began to cry. Then he threw his head back a little. "God! God!" he cried aloud. "Brand it into their young hearts even though You hurt them!"

Now he leaned down again, speaking tenderly. "Do not weep now, my children," he said. "I am not speaking thus to frighten you. Only remember what I say, and when you are a little older you may do much to help. Even to-day you may do something. Speak to your parents of these other children, — ask them to tell you why it is that babies work in the mills all day."

At last he gazed out sombrely into the mass of his adult congregation. "And some of you successful men and women, you, too, will not forget, although you may grind your teeth and swear you have forgotten. So does the lesser man fight with his angel! And these dear babes are yet to bear me testimony. When I am dust again, lying dreamless in my Carolina hills, — and may God grant me that sweet haven for my last resting-place, — these words of mine may live, and sting, and goad you back to righteousness!"

Again came the blenching face and the cry of agony. He tottered forward and raised both hands.

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“ In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost! ” he cried. For one long moment he looked straight upward into the face of God. Then he fell. Before the first one reached him, he was dead.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RUTH INTERCEDES

It is to be feared that Harvey would have remained where he was all day had not Ruth insisted that he return to earth, more particularly to that unlovely bit of it known to the working classes as "Red Village."

They found Lisshy both better and worse than they had anticipated. The arm, which was most important, showed little increase of inflammation. Her fever, on the contrary, burned more hotly, and had so added to the patient's nervousness that she could not keep her frail body still for a moment. She complained that mill noises were in her head. A blur of insistent flies, circling close above, sounded, as she now told Ruth, like "them old mill spools comin' arter me!"

"Why doesn't some one sit here and keep the flies off the child?" asked Ruth, turning an indignant glance toward the figure of Martin, seated, as usual, in the broken rocker; then, hopeless of response from such a lump of clay, toward the more active Jane, a lean, unlovely effigy of a woman, now, for an instant, at pause in the doorway.

In answer to Ruth's scornful eyes and questioning, she gave a shrug, and, by way of response, began to work the short snuff-stick in about her discolored gums.

"The lady, las' night, breshed flies an' skeeters off'n me, too," whimpered Lisshy.

Ruth sat down on the empty cracker box. No fan was to be seen, so she took out her handkerchief and waved it vigorously.

"Thank you, Ma'am," said Lisshy presently, a smile gilding the pain in her dark eyes. "You're mighty good, but hit don't smell ez sweet ez Lady's did las' night."

"I never use scent or perfume," said Ruth, a little stiffly.

"Didn't I tell you to shet up talkin' erbout that woman?" said Jane, in an angry undertone. The child shrank and turned her face away, remaining almost breathless until the speaker's shambling figure went from the room. Martin rose, also, and the two moved toward the rear of the house from whence, a moment later, their low voices came as if in consultation. Ruth sent a quick look of apprehension to her lover, who now bent over to claim Lisshy's fluttering wrist. "Is Mawmer gone fer true?" the child whispered fearfully, and when Ruth reassured her, submitted gratefully to the doctor's ministrations. Soon she began to watch with pleasure Ruth's pretty, softened face, and to note the way that Harvey's eyes went to it. Now she looked critically at Ruth. "You're pretty, too," she said gravely. "Your cheeks is pink, like flowers." The dark up-raised eyes went to Harvey. "Is he your man?" asked Lisshy.

Ruth's flower-like pinkness deepened to crimson. "Yes, Lisshy, he is my man."

Harvey bent a little lower, that his lips might brush Ruth's cheek. Lisshy smiled dreamily, pleased with the picture; then, all at once, her expression changed. "I wonder ef Lady's got a man," she murmured.

"Hush, dear, your parents are coming," Ruth warned, quickly.

Martin came in heavily, followed by Jane. For the first time Harvey looked steadily at the bloated wretch who had been Maris' husband. Disease, dissipation, misfortune, were all in evidence; yet through the gross envelopment of the present man, it was easy to recognize traces of both strength and physical beauty. He seemed to feel and to resent the doctor's cool scrutiny. He stared back boldly, jerked his thumb in the direction of the cowering Lissy and demanded: "How long befo' that kid kin git outer here?"

Ruth, too, was watching the speaker, and listening keenly. She saw that he was affecting a manner of speech more crude and ignorant than his own.

"You mean, of course, to a hospital or a more sanitary room?" Harvey was replying to the man's question.

Martin grunted impatiently. "I said, git out. I didn't say where."

"It could only be to a hospital," reiterated the physician. "With a good ambulance I should say we could move her at almost any time."

Jane, in the background, gave a sniff. Martin displayed a crooked smile. "I wasn't thinkin' uv ambulances or red automobiles," said the latter. "Po' folks has to ride shanks's mare."

"It's out of the question to think of moving her at all," spoke up Ruth, sharply.

Neither Martin nor his wife appeared to have heard her. The man's bloodshot eyes, now with something of a challenge, were fixed on Page. "I'm askin' you professionally, and I want an honest answer," he insisted, doggedly. "As a matter uv pure

human endurance, couldn't she be moved at 'most any time? That's what I'm gettin' at!"

Ruth sprang to her feet. "Give them the strictest orders not to attempt to move her, Harvey! Don't you see —" She broke off suddenly, and in the silence Jane laughed aloud. "Orders!" she echoed, with a sneer.

"You see, Miss Alden," said Martin, in a more conciliatory voice, "the fact is that Buck McGhee has threatened to turn us out at a minute's notice, and us poor folks has to think ahead to know whether a roof's goin' to cover us or not."

"I shall make it my business to see that Mr. McGhee does nothing of the sort. My brother has left full authority with Dr. Page and myself."

Jane regarded her with unconcealed scorn. "An' do you suppose it's goin' to make any difference to Buck McGhee, with the Boss out er taown at that?" she drawled. "Buck owns this village and ev'ry-thing in it. Him an' Mr. Winch here has had words. That means 'git out' fer us. Ain't that so, Jim?"

The man nodded. Ruth fancied she caught the gleam of a wink. His crooked smile dawned again, but was instantly suppressed. Ruth was now certain that the quarrel with McGhee was being used as a pretext, and that the two sordid creatures before her were planning quite an independent campaign of their own.

Lisshy lay silent, almost forgotten, her eyes turning from one adult face to another. It was intoxicating to realize that all this eager discussion concerned her welfare. Never before had she been able to think of herself as of the least importance. The present sensation was not unwelcomed.

"McGhee does not own this village, as he will soon find out," Ruth now cried, with the more heat that

she felt doubtful. "I shall go in person to his house and tell him that you are not to be disturbed; and that the little girl is to remain Dr. Page's patient until she is much, much better."

"You kin go," said Jane with her irritating shrug. "But you'll do more harm than good. He'll jes' laugh in his sleeve at you. Don't you suppose that Buck knows you Yankees ain't got no more idee uv mill people than a hog's got uv Sunday?"

"You are judging my brother by other indifferent mill owners," said Ruth. "That is not just. He is deeply concerned because of poor little Lisshy's accident. That is the reason why we are so anxious to help you and her."

Jane's dull eyes brightened with anger. "Then why didn't he see to it that the movin'-bands in the children's spoolin' room was kept covered?" she cried fiercely.

Ruth's valiant manner drooped. She felt a sense of personal shame. "You are right in that charge, Mrs. Winch," she said, quite humbly. "That was most regrettable. But my brother has had no experience with machinery, and for the present has to rely on the statements of his overseer. I think Mr. McGhee ought to be discharged in disgrace!"

Martin gave a grunt. "That wouldn't skeer Buck a little bit. They ain't a mill in this county or the next that wouldn't be glad to git him, an' he knows it. He's got the reputation o' bein' the hardest and the best mill driver in the South. Besides that, he can lie and trick himself straight with any boss. You won't find your brother any different, Miss Alden."

The man's words came to Ruth weighted with a convincing hopelessness. They seemed the very breath of that dull lethargy which helps to keep

the laboring classes of the South in thrall. She tried to fight the influence back, to pierce its shadowy substance with weapons of optimism, but before she could find words Jane had faced her and was sending out a torrent of bitter speech. "They're all alike. Fer a little while, at fust, they think they're goin' to be different, then they stop carin'. They are down here to make money, and ez long ez hit shows up, they don't ask questions. The po' people, down South, is jes' so much grist to them, — jes' corn to be chewed up in the mill. Look at us!" She gave a gesture, dramatic through its pent-up hate. "Look at the holes we live in, an' the cloze we wear. As we grows old in work our yaller skin sca'cely stretches across our tired bones. All day we toils in the mill from six to six, an' sometimes in the night, besides. An' fer what, — good money?" She gave a laugh that sounded like a snarl. "We never gits to touch our money. Oh, no! They shove a bunch o' tickets at us every week or so, an' these we kin take down to the mill store, an' swap fer maggoty bacon and sour corn-meal. Ef we don't like this, we kin lump it. We mus' buy bad truck at high prices in our own mill store, or starve. The tickets is good in the barroom, too," she sent a meaning glance toward Martin, who fell back a step, scowling. "But all this helps to make the mill profits big," the speaker went on. "Hit gives the boss a chanst, every now and then, to buy a new red automobile." She looked out slowly and with scorn to where the big car stood waiting in the sun. The eyes of her listeners followed. Suddenly Jane threw her arms above her head and broke into shrill laughter. "O, them's great things, them red automobiles," she cried. "Wouldn't it be funny ef me an' Jim should take to ridin' eround in one?"

"Shut up, you fool," said Martin savagely.

"I shall go at once to McGhee," said Ruth, with decision. Her eyes were now on Harvey. His clean, fine face aroused in her a sense of passionate thankfulness that he was near. Compared with him the other creatures in the room, even poor Lissy, were grisly spectres. "I see that Mr. McGhee is to be used as a menace to your patient. The thing to do now is to turn him at once into an ally. I feel sure that by going to him alone, and appealing to the good that is in all men, I shall succeed."

"Of course you would succeed," said Harvey instantly, "and yet —"

Jane interrupted with a question. "She thinkin' o' goin' to Buck McGhee's house, alone?"

"To be sure I am," said Ruth, answering for herself. "A good woman can take care of herself anywhere."

Jane kept silence, but an evil smile lurked on her lips.

"I presume that, if not married, he has some sort of a housekeeper, — his mother, or some other elderly woman," Ruth went on to Jane, in her haughtiest manner.

"Oh, yes," said Jane carelessly. "They's a nigger, Mammy Venus. She takes good keer o' him. She thinks he's erbout the onliest thing on God's earth, too. She raised him after his white Mammy died."

Ruth sent a triumphant look toward her lover. Surely if McGhee could command a devotion like this, he must have good in him. But the young man's face did not clear. "I think I'd better go with you, and dress the child's arm later."

"She's got more chanst uv gittin' what she wants ef she goes alone," said Jane, still nonchalant. "Thet

is," she added, " ef she sho', after all, she kin take keer uv herself."

Ruth threw back her head, disdaining answer. " Wait for me here, Harvey," she said. " It is only a bit of a way down the road. I'll be back again in half an hour." Without waiting for further words Ruth hurried out, the two Martins watching her with unfathomable looks upon their sodden faces.

Harvey was the first to speak. " Now, then, Mrs. Winch," he said with perfunctory lightness, " I shall need your assistance here."

" Oh, Doctor, you won't hurt much!" Lissy began to plead. Martin, after the briefest of glances at the bed, went out more swiftly than Harvey had yet seen him move.

Out in the sunshine, Ruth felt all of her courage revive. Plans and hopes again took shape. She walked on lightly, her mind flecking between bright memories of her new-found happiness, and the dark problems of Maris' desperate condition.

She was familiar with the house where the overseer lived, a neat one-story cottage with vines across the front and a flower garden on three sides. To reach it she needed to turn quite sharply to the left, so that the Winch house and the waiting car were abruptly lost to view.

March was nearing its end, and the warm days had already sent more than one faint, languorous hint of their near approach. But this fair day had still a tang to it, a delicious coolness that made one draw long breaths and loose them slowly. Although it was Sunday morning, the village seemed almost as deserted as upon week days. Women and children, exhausted by six consecutive days of work, slept heavily. From one cottage and then another

came the fretful wail of an untended child. Once she passed close to an old woman seated on a step. Her yellow face was taut with innumerable wrinkles, and her hair whiter than the cotton lint which had powdered it through so many years. Across her knees hung a very young infant sucking greedily at a strip of bacon rind. Perhaps her consternation at this sight flashed into Ruth's face, for the old woman smiled apologetically, and remarked: "Hit's Maw is plum wore out at the mills. I'm tryin' to keep hit hushed up so she kin rest a mite longer. Babies is allays wust on Sundays; they misses the buzz an' hum."

Ruth paused to give some commonplace reply. Light, graceful utterance did not come readily to her, but she felt the new softness of her heart deepen to pity at sight of the smile on the old face, and the thought of the exhausted mother asleep within the barren hut.

"Won't you step in and rest your bonnet, Miss?" came the courteous invitation.

"I can't just now, I'm afraid," said Ruth, with a returning smile, "I am in rather a hurry. But I'd like to call again, some time, if I may."

"Any time at all, Miss," said the old dame, eagerly. "They won't have me in the mills no more. I jes' sets here, tendin' my daughter's babies, an' thinkin'." A wistful sadness quivered among the yellow wrinkles. "I'm powerful glad sometimes to have a pleasant-spoken visitor."

Ruth hurried on, registering a vow to make the call to-morrow if it were possible. She reflected, too, upon the real fibre of a social class known everywhere, contemptuously, as "Po' white trash," which yet held latent such charming qualities of courtesy.

The overseer's home made an attractive picture in the sunlight. It alone, of all the village, boasted a surrounding fence. This had been recently white-washed and shone out with dazzling cleanliness. The gate was painted a dull green. At each side of it stood a low, thick, umbrella China-tree, now masses of purple, lilac-like flowers. Their heavy perfume filled the air, and seemed to lie on the earth like a dew. Years afterward when, travelling in foreign countries, Ruth chanced upon a blossoming China-tree, the odor turned her sick and faint.

The garden beds, of shapes and relative placing suggested by the passing whim of Mammy Venus only, were edged with beer and whiskey bottles buried, neck downward, to within a few inches of the upper end. Scattered throughout the beds was a medley of roses and old-fashioned blooms, tansy, flag-lilies, bachelor-buttons, rosemary, phlox, and larkspur. The great rose vine across the face of the house was a "Lady Banksia," just beginning to open its small, multitudinous, buff-colored flowers. Tangled amidst its luxuriance ran a wistaria vine, now hung with purple clusters. It was already past its prime, and Aunt Venus even now was sweeping fallen azure florets from the "gallery" floor.

At sight of her Ruth's courage rose still higher. Aunt Venus' massive bulk alone might promise safety. She wore a black and white calico dress, a long blue gingham apron, hand-embroidered across the bottom in white thread, and an old-fashioned bandanna head-kerchief of orange, black and white. It all made a charming picture, and Ruth walked softly that she might take her fill of it.

"Is this the home of Mr. McGhee?" she asked politely, when she had almost reached the speaker.

Mammy turned slowly. The unexpected voice had not startled her in the least. All of her motions partook of leisure and of dignity.

"Yas'm, it sho'ly is," she vouchsafed at length. Her tone was not exactly cordial. The rolling of her great ox-like eyes might even be said to express mistrust.

"Then you must be his housekeeper, of whom I have heard," Ruth hurried on, with more confidence than she felt. "I am very glad that you are here. I am Miss Alden, and would like to speak, for a moment, with your master."

Aunt Venus leaned ponderously on her broom. The supple straw writhed upward into a protesting shell. "Mas'r! Whose master? I ain't had no mas'r sence de war, 'scusin' Jesus," she began, throatily when, from behind the green blinds of a window came a rich second voice, half angry, half amused: "That's Miss Alden, the boss's sister. Ask her in, you old fool nigger, you!"

"Marse Buck's dressin' hissef in thar," stated Aunt Venus, quite superfluously. "He sez you kin come in."

This was a little too much. Ruth felt hysterical. "I regret having disturbed Mr. McGhee so early in the day," she rejoined in a clear voice. The hour was now past eleven. "I would not allow him to be disturbed but for the fact that I have come upon important business. Yes, I shall wait. No, not in the house, — certainly not! I will stop out here, on the verandah."

"Fetch a chair. The best plush rocker. And get a move on you fer once!" Thus the voice behind the blinds.

The chair of state finally dragged forth and Ruth seated upon it, she was able to review the situation

more complacently. Aunt Venus had vanished within doors. The sounds of masculine robing were at pause. Over the valley a Sabbath stillness lay. The big mill stood like a deserted fortress, its thousand windows dull. Beyond the crest of Red Horse Hill huge clouds of white arose, dissolved, re-formed, and heaped their glittering spheres anew. The sky behind them was blue as a turquoise shield. A mocking-bird swooped down to a China-tree where, perched among the blossoms, he sang with a spring-time ecstasy.

McGhee had, by this, evidently enticed his house-keeper to the rear, there to confer more privately. But Mammy was guiltless of diplomacy. Her voice, booming against his whispered "hush," rose now, distressingly audible. "I ain't got no sort o' patience wid dese brazen jades er comin' arter you, to your very do'! Kain't even git yo' Sunday mornin' nap fer 'em."

McGhee gave a low, fierce reprimand, but Mammy was undaunted. "Bustin' up all my projects, too," she rumbled. "I'se bleegee to go to Zion, I tell you!"

To this the man muttered a conciliatory sentence, then suddenly raised his voice as if wishing Ruth to hear. "And, remember, the next time a lady like Miss Alden comes to this house, you're to behave as if you were used to ladies whether you are or not."

Mammy, partially subdued, growled out something about "All right den. Jes' so 's Zion's safe."

McGhee's reply was even more cryptic. "Buttermilk, first; then Zion."

The sound of his advancing footsteps, wonderfully light and elastic for a giant, could be heard along the hall. Ruth sat rigidly upright and told herself to be at ease. It was for Maris and the child

that she had come. Let her keep that fact always first in mind.

McGhee came forward with a quiet grace and courtesy that many a city man might have envied. "This is mighty kind of you, Miss Alden," he began. "I can't tell you how I appreciate the honor."

She smiled faintly, and gave him gray, gloved finger-tips. "You must realize," she said, a little breathlessly, "that it is a matter of business, of urgent necessity, that brings me here at all."

"Uv co'se I know, only too darned well," he answered whimsically. "But kain't you let a feller feel proud fer jes' five minutes?" He walked a few paces beyond her to the top of the low entrance steps, where he leaned against a wooden pillar draped in vines, and stood looking down with undisguised pleasure into her face. The freshness of the clear spring was about him. He glowed with the colors of youth, and health and an almost savage vitality. Scarcely knowing that she did so Ruth smiled back at him. Then the object of her visit nudged her.

"I came to say," she began, with more determination, when an imploring gesture stopped her.

"Why sech a turrible hurry on Sunday morning? Bizness kin always manage to wait. Jes lemme look at you in peace a minute. It ain't often I have anything so pretty on my front gallery, not even when my Lady Banksia here is in full bloom." He put a hand up to touch the shining leaves. He seemed a big, kind-hearted boy whom it would be inhuman to affront. "Mammy's goin' to bring us out some uv her buttermilk right away," he went on as if coaxing. "An' Mammy's buttermilk can't be beat."

"Please, — please, don't put yourself or your servant to further trouble," Ruth pleaded. "What I have to say to you will take only a moment."

"That's jes' what I'm skeered of," said Buck, naively. "You'll git through too all-fired quick, and then —" a gesture toward the gate completed the sentence.

Ruth laughed in spite of her annoyance, and at this instant Mammy sailed out like a large, dusky balloon, conveying a tray on which stood two glasses of thick white fluid. She took one and placed it on the floor beside her until she should have removed her gloves. Buck sat down on the top step, possessed himself of the remaining glass, and proceeded to a leisurely and audible enjoyment of the contents.

Ruth swiftly drank a portion of hers, and replaced the glass upon the floor with a determined thump. "I have just come from the Winches' cottage, Mr. McGhee," she announced.

Buck drained, unhasting, his last drop, set his glass down, and began feeling about in his pockets for a handkerchief with which to remove the curdled crescent of buttermilk perched now upon his upper lip. Finally successful, he performed the operation with lingering care, and then, turning his blue eyes to his visitor, said softly, "From the Winches' cottage. What a tender-hearted lady you must be." He sighed heavily and shook his curly head. "Po' little Lisshy! That accident o' hern jes' about broke me up. An' now, to think it's all over!"

"All over! What do you mean by that?"

"Ain't the kid dead, then?" asked Buck, genuinely surprised.

"Certainly she's not dead. She's doing nicely. Is that the way you keep in touch with your mill people?"

Buck's eyes fell. "Somehow I got it into my haid that the poor little devil's troubles were over. I kinder hoped, fer her sake, that they were. I shp'

thought she was dead. That's the reason I haven't been after Jim Winch sooner."

Ruth stiffened. "Been after him, to turn him out?" she asked severely.

Buck's eyes were set on the speaker. It could not be said that his face changed, yet, all at once, it was not the face of a good-natured boy. "So he's told you that, has he? And it's him that's sent you here —"

"No one sent me," Ruth interrupted. "I came of my own free will to ask you to help Dr. Page and me save Lisshy's life. In the first place," she hurried on, "Dr. Page should be allowed to keep on with the case. This is of paramount importance. If, with all the complications, it is taken over now by your ordinary mill doctor, it will surely mean her death."

"Kennedy's got no call to butt in at this late day," said McGhee thoughtfully. Kennedy was the mill doctor. "Has he been tryin' to shoot off his mouth?"

Ruth paused, perplexed. She needed a moment in which to translate into her own language this alien phrase. More by instinct than logic she finally grasped the meaning and replied to it. "Oh, no. Nothing whatever has been heard from Mr. Kennedy. The difficulty arises from Dr. Page's own feelings of delicacy."

McGhee leaned his handsome head back against the pillar and laughed aloud, — an infectious sound. "Well, Miss Alden, you kin say to your city doctor that usin' delicacy in these parts is sorter like hoein' cotton in white kid gloves. Hit ain't helpful. Jes' let him keep on with Winch's little gal as long as he has a mind to. Fer my part I'll never git done bein' thankful that we had sech a cracker jack doctor on hand when it happened!"

"Nor I!" echoed Ruth eagerly. Something besides the thought of Lisshy was turning her smile into sunlight.

"An' you come all this way alone, jes' to make things straight fer a sick baby," he murmured, his blue gaze melting against her own.

"How fortunate that I did," the girl laughed. A happiness such as hers is an Eden where a very large serpent may safely conceal himself. Her answering look was sweeter, more provocative than she knew. The dark, animal blood surged up in McGhee's neck, and burned in his clean-shaven face. The first vague hint of uneasiness touched his companion. She made as if to rise. "Well, I am successful in the main thing, — but there is one other —"

"Good Lord! More business!" cried the man. "I had jes' begun to hope fer a little chat all to ourselves."

"I am afraid that I have time this morning only for business," she reiterated, and felt that she had to use effort to keep her smile still kind.

The man's face underwent, now, a distinct transformation. His underlip shook slightly, and he turned away before asking, gruffly: "More about Winch?"

"Yes, he said that you and he had had words, and that you threatened to turn him out at once, even though Lisshy were still very sick. A few moments ago I heard him asking Dr. Page whether it would be fatal to move her."

McGhee's eyes had been brightening with an increase of attention. He now removed his gaze, and leaned back slowly. A long and thoughtful interval was allowed to pass before he attempted speech. Ruth found herself waiting with some impatience.

"That's a bad egg, — that Winch," said McGhee,

at last. Even in denunciation his voice was low and rich and good to hear.

"Many's the time," he went on, "that I've wished I'd never seen him. He's the sort, him an' that forlorn wife an' kid o' his'n, that gives a bad name to mill villages."

"Even so, the child is not to blame," insisted Ruth. "Let us think only of her. You certainly are not going to evict the family while she is in this desperate condition!"

McGhee's face darkened. "I don't consider myself quite a devil," he said.

Before the embarrassed Ruth could frame words for excuse or extenuation he had turned a searching look toward her. "No," he repeated in a less sullen tone, "I ain't no devil, no matter what some of these folks about here may say, — but I'm a man, with a man's reasonin' powers, an' it's comin' to me stronger with each minute, that there's something all fired peculiar in this Winch affair. Mill chillun has a finger or a foot took off every now an' then. Sometimes one uv the poor little vermin is killed outright an' buried on that clay slope to the north o' Red Horse Hill. I've been an overseer here for nigh onto fourteen years, an' I've seen all these things happen, but I ain't never before chanced to observe red automobiles chasin' through Red Village, or fine young city doctors spendin' their time in the hovel of an injured child."

His eyes, now hard and blue as steel, seemed to grip Ruth's heart. She held herself together bravely, though she felt the small shivers of apprehension run along her veins. What was he trying to drag from her with that relentless scrutiny? Or had she, already, betrayed too much?

Fragments of a dozen sentences darted into her

mind, only to be hurled back. In order to do something which might relieve the uncomfortable strain she sprang to her feet. McGhee did not rise, and, for an instant, the advantage in her physical position gave her a fictitious dignity.

"Having just arrived in Sidon, I am not competent to discuss past events," she said to him coldly and with an obvious effort at ease. "This is my first experience, and I find it of intense, though of heart-rending interest. I cannot thank you enough, Mr. McGhee, for the relief your promise not to molest the Winches has given me." Here she stepped closer and extended her hand for a farewell. "I am leaving in a much more optimistic frame of mind than when I came, I assure you."

McGhee appeared not to see the hand. He was gazing outward dreamily to the purple China-trees where a second mocking-bird now swayed and sang. He waited for the joyous arietta to end before he drawled out, gently: "All the same, I wouldn't advise you to be too certain that things is goin' as you want with Lisshy."

The hand fell abruptly. She did not ask his meaning, but stood, silent and confounded, waiting until he should choose to speak again.

"You see," he went on in the same gentle, ruminative way, "I'm perfectly aware that you ain't been tellin' me the half of what was in yo' mind; likewise I ain't got no call to take off my front shutters, and tell you to look in. But this much I'll make you a present of — fer good feelin'. — Keep your eye on Winch."

Ruth abandoned all pretense. "Why he, — what sort of thing could he do, so long as you and my brother are determined to protect the child?"

"This is a free land, lady," smiled the other.

"Nothin' this side er death or God A'mighty can hinder Jim Winch from lightin' out ef he takes a notion to light."

"You mean, — going away, — carrying Lisshy with him?"

McGhee nodded. "The same. Didn't you tell me you heerd him ask the doctor about movin' her?"

"Yes, but, — that was because of you. He said it was."

McGhee laughed, a low, musical, irritating sound. "Oh, ef Winch *said* it was —" he echoed, and then fell silent, the wrinkles of mirth about his eyes twitching.

"Is there then nothing to be done?" asked the girl, desperately.

Before replying, her host began to rise, slowly, with long, undulating movements like that of a great, sleek cat. Yet, in spite of sensuous grace, there was no hint of femininity. One felt almost a barbaric muscular strength in each languid turn.

At full height his brown head towered up among the flowering vines. From out the fantastic setting his clean-shaven, boyish face looked out with an absurd resemblance to a cherub on an Easter card.

Whatever shrewd or calculating thoughts had recently possessed his mind were now discarded. Kindness, good-will and hospitality illuminated every feature. He put forth, at last, an answering farewell hand to hers. "I'll do what I kin because you hev thought enough uv Buck McGhee to ask it," he said to her. "I'll stroll down to Winch's atter awhile, in person, an' make it plain to him that that thar child has got to hev proper care. I'll set the neighbors to watchin' him. I reckon the two uv us, Miss Alden, you an' me, 'll prove a match fer Jim Winch yet!"

He threw back his head to laugh. His splendid teeth flashed white as bits of shell. Ruth's hand was still retained in a gentle, yet compelling hold. The man seemed unconscious of this fact, but Ruth's cheeks began to burn, and she tugged faintly to free herself as she answered: "I will never forget your kindness, Mr. McGhee. Be assured of this."

He bent again to her. His voice was low, and almost oppressive with the warm, musical richness of its tone. "Remember this," he said earnestly. "That whether we can or can't make things go just as we would wish for Lisshy, it ain't goin' to be your fault. You shore hev done your plucky best. I tell you, Miss Alden, women like you are too good to live in a world made fer us men."

"You can scarcely expect me to second that motion," answered Ruth, trying to laugh as easily as he had laughed. But this proved more difficult than she could have foreseen.

"Really, I must be off," she cried, trying to speak brightly. She wrenched her hand away and took a few energetic steps forward.

McGhee checked her by a touch upon the shoulder. "One minute, Miss Alden, jest one more," he pleaded. "Now that you are here, an' we hev become sech good friends, — I was wonderin' whether you would mind very much steppin' inside my little parlor. It ain't much, an' the blinds is gen'ly shut, — but my old mother's picture hangs in there." He broke off abruptly. His voice shook.

For an instant Ruth hesitated. Her first thought was to refuse. Yet how, with no time to make excuses, was a request like this to be denied? Better accede at once and have it over. Besides, if the man really loved the memory of his mother and kept the

darkened parlor as a shrine — This last reflection turned the scales.

"I shall be glad to see your mother's picture," said Ruth. "Is this the door?"

"Nome. This one, to your right," said McGhee, keeping well in the rear, but stretching, now, a long arm past her to reach the rusty knob.

Under his powerful grasp it shook, then turned, protesting in small shrieks at its long disuse. He did not open the panel at once.

"This is the door, Miss," he repeated.

Without taking further steps forward, Ruth leaned over and smote the door with her gloved left hand. She, too, was strong for a woman, and instantly the creaking panel swung back far enough to show an unswept apartment with no furniture but a square pine table and four chairs in the centre, — crude paraphernalia, it would seem, for midnight card games. On the walls, for ornament, hung various posters, pictorial calendars and liquor advertisements of the grossest sort.

In an instant the girl had wheeled; the fury of outraged womanhood was in her face and voice. "You dared! You dared!"

She put her two hands to her throat, and stood looking at him, as if incredulous of the insult.

McGhee glared back at her. The bold assurance of his mien was gone. "You came here after me," he cried. "You knew well enough I wasn't no Pilgrim Father. What did you expect when you come alone, — on Sunday mornin'?"

"There was a woman here," Ruth looked about as if hoping to see Mammy Venus' protecting bulk.

"She's safe in Zion," chuckled the man malignantly. "I took good care to hurry her off to church."

"Oh, oh," Ruth gasped, now almost speechless with indignation. "My brother shall know of this!"

"An' so shall my friend Jim Winch," retorted the other. "Maybe I know a little more uv your game than you hev been countin' on. I'll go to Winch's house, just like I promised, — I won't take too much time to start there, neither. An' what I'll say to him —"

"Hush, I will hear no more!" cried Ruth, putting her hand up to her ears. In another moment she was down the steps and speeding between the purple China-trees.

As she ran, long, dry sobs of terror kept rising in her throat. All her high courage had ebbed, now that the necessity of using it was over. She knew that he was not pursuing, yet she dared not look around. She pressed both hands tightly over her ears that she might never again hear that sickening voice. Her thoughts would not come clearly. Wild terrors, snatches of fear, scurrying apprehensions came and went. It was as if, in a well-ordered city garden, a host of wild-fowl should suddenly appear and circle, screaming. There was no conscious statement of her own situation until when, in a turn in the road, she came full view upon the waiting motor-car. Now she was safe. Her speed slackened. She could have thrown herself down at full length upon the clay to weep. At the door of the still distant cottage stood a tall figure clothed in gray. He waved down to her, and she could almost see the happiness that brightened in his eyes. She stretched her arms out once and let them fall. "Oh, I can never tell him, — I can never find words to tell of such a thing!" she sobbed aloud. As she spoke her voice held the echo of a former tragedy that she now seemed to relive. Where had she heard the

phrase? And why did a new pity spring at sound of them? She stopped short in the road, for Maris' wild, imploring eyes seemed to stare at her. It was Maris who had said: "Because I adore him I have no words to speak."

"Poor soul, — poor soul," whispered the girl, and warm tears soothed her cheek. Now, more than ever was Maris' grief her own. Love gave her insight and understanding."

"I shall tell my lover everything," said she firmly, to herself. "But oh, poor Maris, — poor Maris. I tried to help you and I have failed. I've made things worse for you and Lisshy!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LISSHY FINDS A WAY

THE noon hour of a certain springtide Sabbath in the little town of Sidon was destined long to be remembered.

In the history of the Aldens' private family it was pivotal. Not only was Ruth's happy future then determined, but, with regard to Maris' already desperate affairs, the girl's well-meant efforts at mediation had given new outlet and impetus to the powers of darkness.

This latter aspect of the hour, however, belonged to the eastern slope of Red Horse Hill. The more communal shock, that of Dr. Singleterry's sudden and dramatic death, lay to the west, and shook to its core the wealthy and pretentious element of the town.

It chanced that, at the very instant in which Ruth, at bay on the verandah of the overseer's home, flashed out to him: "Hush. I will hear no more!" the minister, Dr. Singleterry, standing in the chancel of fashionable St. John's, was crying aloud through the blinding agonies of death: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost!"

The first person to reach the stricken man was Maris Alden. No one quite realized how she had found her way in so miraculously short a space of time, but she was kneeling with the white head pillowed in her arms before the half paralyzed vestry-

men had started from their pews. When, at last, they came, she was able to look up quite calmly and to say: "He was my father's friend. I have known and loved him since my childhood."

She walked beside the silent form as it was conveyed into the rectory; and suggested to the bearers that it be taken up-stairs to the usual bed-chamber. When left alone for a moment, with her friend, she bent to his ear and whispered: "Don't go too far away just yet. You are free to aid me now. Be my great strength and help."

Even in the first terrible instant of seeing him fall, Maris had felt little sense of shock. The words of his sermon had lifted her, already, above the reach of merely personal emotion; and this tremendous climax to a situation already overpowering seemed a thing predestined, — something that God had willed, and was now bringing to fulfilment. Steadily, since then, a feeling of strength, almost of exaltation, had been growing up in her heart.

When Ruth reached home and was told the incredible news, her first pang was for Maris. "This, too," she thought, "and, in addition, I am bringing her more grief."

She went to the rectory at once, and was both astonished and relieved at the calm beauty of her sister's face.

Maris' first question, when they were in the street, was for Felicia.

"Physically, she is doing astonishingly well," answered Ruth. "If only —" She paused that Maris might have time to realize the presence of grave doubt.

"Yes, — if?" Maris asked quickly.

"If only we can find a way to protect her from human fiends!" cried Ruth with bitterness. Then she

told her companion of the hideous experience through which she had passed, and her conviction that McGhee had now become an implacable enemy.

Maris took the bad news quietly.

"I fear you are right about his being an enemy," she said at length. "He will surely go to Winch and help him out in whatever evil schemes that he and that dreadful Jane are planning."

Ruth gave a little moan of self deprecation.

"It isn't your fault, dear Ruth," said the other on the instant, and tried to smile. "You were brave, — wonderfully brave to go at all; and I thank heaven that nothing worse came to you because of it. But it is true that Felicia is in danger every moment; and we must think quickly if we are to save her."

"I told it all to Harvey, — to, er — Dr. Page," Ruth corrected, her cheeks flaming at the slip. "I knew that you would not care. He will do everything to help us."

Maris, sensitive through all her perplexity to the fluting love note in the speaker's voice, turned suddenly, searched the girl's downcast face with brightening eyes, and then cried out, as if in triumph: "Ruth, Ruth! at least one joy has come through this distress."

Ruth lifted her head and returned the look with shy courage. Maris had never seen her eyes so sweet. "You have no words of condemnation that it should come by such a path?" she whispered.

"It is the one thing on earth that could make that path less hard for me," said Maris earnestly.

"Maris! whatever your faults, you are a good, good woman. I have never known of one so generous!" cried Ruth impulsively.

"I am a very weak and foolish woman, Ruth," said the other, "and, just now, a sorely tormented

one. Tell me, if you are willing, all that the kind young doctor said, and what he thinks possible to be done."

By this time they were at the door of the Alden home. "Thank heaven!" cried Ruth, as they stepped into the quiet drawing-room; "here we can talk freely!"

Harvey's plan, and, indeed, the only course that to him and Ruth seemed practicable, was the bold one of gaining bodily possession of Felicia; and to make the attempt at the earliest possible moment. "Don't you see it for yourself?" asked Ruth.

"Yes," answered the other, still quite calmly. "It is the only way. But how, — on what authority?"

"On that of Harvey as physician in charge, and also by virtue of directions left with me by Dwight."

At the mention of her husband's name, Maris flinched, and, for a moment, turned away her face. When she spoke it was in a low voice, not altogether controlled. "It seems such a desperate thing to do, even if it is the only one. And if we fail — oh, if we should fail!" Ruth saw her shiver at the thought. "Then, if we should succeed," the speaker went on desperately, "where is there that she could go? It can not be here, in Dwight's house."

"No, Harvey has thought of all that. He will take her as his patient, to Putnam's Hotel. To think of a town the size of this without a Sanatorium!"

Maris clasped her hands. A look of great relief softened the strain on her face. "Oh, you are so kind and thoughtful, both of you! This is the very best arrangement that could be made. Perhaps, — perhaps, — if you spoke to him about it, Ruth, — Dr. Page would let me come there, too, and nurse my baby."

"As if that hadn't been the very centre of our scheming from the first," cried Ruth, in gentle mockery.

Maris could only stretch out a grateful hand. She sat silent for a time, choking back the sobs that rose, one by one, in her slender throat. When she had conquered, she still sat there, staring out, with shining eyes, into a future where, at the worst, she would be near Felicia.

Ruth, watching her, felt that she must not let assurance go too far. "Of course, dear," she said gently, "you must not forget that the situation is acute and critical. Even if things go as we are hoping, there must be some complications. The Winches will be infuriated. You must be prepared to have the whole story made public!"

"Oh, publicity, gossip, scandal! What are they to me, when Felicia's very life is at stake?" cried Maris. "The only sorrow they can give," she added, "is in the reflected disgrace upon — your brother, — and perhaps you may feel it upon you."

"I do not believe that either of us will care much about this part of the tragedy."

"You are above it all, dear Ruth, in your new happiness; but oh, think of him, — of Dwight!"

"We must not!" said Ruth. "We can afford to think only of what gives us strength. Now to return to the main theme, — a great point in your favor is that Winch, — I prefer to keep on calling him by that name, — has sworn falsely to the child's birthplace, age, and name."

"Yet may not that very fact bring more danger, now?" asked Maris, with an acuteness which astonished her companion. "You see, the false swearing alone would make him anxious to get out of this State before investigations were begun."

Ruth found no words for the moment; nor could she altogether conceal the expression of her face. Maris was quick to catch the alarm.

"So that is our weak point, then, as well as a strong one. We ought to act at once, — this moment. Why do we have to wait? Why are we not starting now?"

"It would be madness, Harvey said, to go there by daylight. McGhee will have been, and stirred the Winches, perhaps the neighbors, too, to excitement. We must wait quietly until dark, and then go in the motor car, trusting for the suddenness of our attack, so to speak, to help in its success."

"But suppose, before dark, they have taken her away!" Maris had begun to wring her hands silently.

"There are no trains on Sunday afternoon. The first one is at seven to-morrow. There is no other way for her to be moved. Even McGhee's venom would not go to the length of parting with a horse and buggy."

"No, perhaps not," answered Maris doubtfully. "Yet I wish we could be starting now. To wait is nothing short of torture."

"Try to be calm. The time will get past somehow," said Ruth, soothingly. "Look, already the sun is nearing the ragged sky-line of Red Horse Hill."

She pointed out through the window and Maris, now one great nerve of restlessness, rose and walked to it, staring outward.

"Yes, the sun is nearing it, but when it gets there the trees will catch it like a kite. It will never go down! Time is like that when you want it to go fast!" she turned back, abruptly, toward Ruth.

"Where is he now, your lover?"

"He went back to the hotel to make preparations."

"Yes, you are both good," Maris repeated, almost

as if she were talking to herself. "I sha'n't try to thank either of you yet. It would be impossible. But I shall not forget!" Again she was silent, her face pressed against the cold pane of glass that fronted Red Horse Hill.

Ruth rose and joined her. "Dear," she asked gently, "wouldn't you like to be alone for a while?"

Maris seemed to hesitate. "For, to speak truly," Ruth went on, "I am in need of a brisk little walk. Nothing does me quite so much good at a time like this, — and I won't urge you to come, for I know you never walked briskly in your life."

"Yes," said Maris in answer to the earlier part of Ruth's speech, "I think I would like to be alone, — up-stairs."

They mounted the marble stairs together. Ruth wished to make some slight changes in her toilet. As she started down, again, she called out to Maris: "Harvey and I will be back in good time for starting. If he calls while I am out on my walk, just let him wait for me in the drawing-room."

Maris went to her front window, the one from which she had watched, a few weeks earlier, the dreadful dance of mill children, and let her eyes follow the slender, energetic form of Ruth. She felt dimly in her mind the half-shaped, crowding thoughts that should, by rights, belong to such a moment, but nothing came very clearly. She did not try to rouse the reluctant images, being thankful for the respite. But though her mind continued to remain mercifully torpid, her body would not be quiet for an instant. From chamber to chamber she wandered, gazing now from one, now from another window. The afternoon was very bright, almost unnaturally so, and the sun, now behind Red Horse Hill, sent up a great fan of glittering particles that

hung like a vivid daylit aurora borealis. There was much driving and walking in the streets. Happy young people passed in chattering groups, and little families, father, mother and children, the latter stiff and self-conscious in their Sunday clothes, added to the cheerful scene. Above the circle of reddish light the sky was blue and clear as the petal of a cornflower.

Then all at once a new warmth and stillness fell upon the land. Behind the hill great clouds of black, smoke from a more gigantic factory, rose high. The crimsoning sunset went out like a smothered coal. A wind blew suddenly from the north-west. People in the darkening streets turned small white faces upward and hurried home. Apprehension blew in the air, and the cold increased. Maris was glad of the wind. She threw a western window wide and leaned far out. There was but one magnet for her now, and that lay the other side of the hill. She leaned toward it still farther. A strange hissing sound grew in the rising gale. She saw the comb of trees bend from her, and knew that on the tortured crest the Fates carded their black strands of destiny.

Ruth came into the gate alone, her skirts tossed about in curves.

"Maris, — Maris!" she cried, almost before she had gained the door. Maris hung far over at the top of the stairway.

"Yes!"

"Get ready at once. Harvey is at the garage now, and will be after us in a moment. Shall I come up and help?"

"No, — I have been ready all along."

The wind caught the house and slid around it, shrieking. The old wild Maris sprang to life. This was a thing to do, — to give oneself to the storm,

and let the very frenzy of the element be her aid. With the new vitality full upon her, she went back for her last look at her husband's room. It was dark with the outside storm, and stifling with detention of more heated air. Maris turned on every light and stood, looking about her. Dwight's toilet articles had been taken with him, but his slippers were there, thrust a few inches under his side of the bed. In the closet hung an overcoat and many other articles of his clothing. She opened the door and stared at them, tearless, though her heart beat fast, and she felt a sort of impatient agony shiver along her limbs. Softly she shut the door. "Good-by," she whispered, as if to living things.

Then she went nearer the bed, and stood looking down. There was his pillow. She could fancy the long line made by his straight figure in the bed. From underneath it, the gay slippers grimaced upward at her. Foolish, embroidered things they were, made by herself. Though her husband seldom wore them, not having yet arrived at the slipper and dressing-gown phase of life, he always insisted on keeping them out where he could see them. How many centuries ago had it been since she had known the gaudy handiwork, — secreting it when Dwight had come suddenly into the room, and smiling, when alone, at the pleasure she knew the gift would bring? And even then she had been wronging him during every moment of their life, had been dishonoring him whom she professed so to love. "Yet," she whispered doggedly, "it was love, and I am saying good-by to it forever." She stared a little longer, dry-eyed, at his pillow. "God help you, dear love, to bear the shame I must give," she said aloud. Then she turned out the lights.

At Ruth's suggestion she had packed a small bag

of clothing, and this lay ready in her dressing-room. In the selection she had taken pains to choose only the plainest articles. A battered linen picture-book that had belonged to the baby Felicia lay at the bottom of the bag. She now opened it again, and after some thought took off her wedding ring and placed it under the book. The plain hat and long green veil were already adjusted. She caught up, now, her jacket, put out the dressing-room light, and hurried down the stairs. Ruth was on the front "gallery," watching alternately the curve of the street from whence the red auto-car was to come, and the black, driving clouds above. As Maris stepped out the swinging corner arc-light, as at a signal, clicked, sputtered and broke into its circle of hard blue light, and the red car came full toward them.

"He's brought the chauffeur!" gasped Maris.

"If he did, you may be sure he had reason," answered the other woman, and the two ran down to the gate.

As Ruth truly said, this acceptance of a fourth member of the desperate little party had not come about easily. Harvey had weighed everything and had come to the conclusion that too much depended on the perfect running of the car to risk failure there. Besides, the Frenchman's assistance might be needed. It had not been necessary to tell him more than the fact of the sick child's condition, and his belief that she would die unless removed, at once, from her present squalid surroundings.

Life in Sidon had not appealed to the light-hearted Frenchman as a boon. He was glad for this break in the monotony.

During the swift ascent of Red Horse Hill, Maris retained her outward calm, but her mind moved in torment with the driven clouds above her and the

wind which shrieked and wailed as though in elemental protest at their deed. The trees on the summit bent far over, like a row of grain, and young leaves, tattered, drove fragrance into the night. There was a groaning and creaking of the trunks, and the frightened squeak of branches rubbed into heat, one against another. The wind came from the west, so that in ascending they had the worst of it. Beyond the frenzied forest stretch, comparative calm prevailed. In many of the village houses there were lights, and these could be seen to toss and flare in the sudden gusts. The black mill sat in a swirling cloud of wind. Its own demons of sound, escaped, worked at the shivering window frames for reentrance.

"The storm serves us a good turn," roared Harvey, turning backward to where the two silent women sat. "No one can hear the car in such a gale."

They did not try to answer, only nodding their heads in acquiescence, but a few moments later Maris leaned close to Ruth's ear. "There is no lamp in Lisshy's window," she said.

"Doubtless it has blown out," was the reassuring reply, but both knew that the words were futile. Instinctively their hands clasped, and the pressure of each was hard as the noiseless car began to slacken speed. Maris, unable to control her rising excitement, sprang up and leaned between Harvey and the chauffeur. "There, — there —" she cried, pointing. "That is the cottage. It is dark."

"Stop at the side of it," was Harvey's low order.

They came to a standstill, and, as yet, no one of the villagers, apparently, had seen the car.

Harvey jumped out and went around to the front steps. Maris would have followed, but Ruth caught her arm. "Wait!" she said.

The wind dropped all at once. They could hear Harvey stumbling about the empty rooms. He lighted a match and, as quickly, smothered it. Now he came out, leaving the door wide, and in the intense silence, climbed back to his place. "Return," was the one word he spoke.

Maris and Ruth were still. They knew there was nothing to be said, but the volatile chauffeur was not to be so easily done out of his adventure. "Mon Dieu, — but the leetle seek Mees. Ou est l'enfant?"

"They were too sharp for us, — she is already gone," said Harvey.

They started back as silently as they had come. After a while Maris withdrew her hand from Ruth's and sank more heavily against the leather cushions.

Ruth, after one apprehensive glance, saw that she had not fainted, and she, too, leaned back.

When they reached the porte-cochère of Alden's home, Maris said, gently to the chauffeur: "Thank you, Fernand. Nothing could have been more perfect than the way you drove. I am sorry that we failed."

Only one light had been left burning in the house. This was a beautiful, swinging, oriental lamp in the hall, that served for chandelier. Maris opened the door, and in the low radiance perceived a telegram slipped under it. She opened it with a hand that did not tremble, and read: "Will be with you by ten to-night, Dwight." She gave it silently to Ruth, who, as silently read and passed it to her lover. He read, stared from one white upturned face to the other, read again, and crumpled the yellow scrap in his hands. "Good God," he cried out. "Let somebody say something! This is suffocation!"

Still as there was no answer, he strode forward to the electric switchboard, and turned on all the lights. "That does a little good," he said, almost hysterically. "And, Mrs. Alden, I am going on through to the sideboard."

Ruth understood, and said to him: "Bring some to Maris, too."

Maris did not seem to hear. A fold of the old apathy came round her. She wandered in, aimlessly, and stood in the centre of the brilliant room, looking about as if to determine where she was. Rich color was all about her, flowers, the sparkle of cut glass, and the wide flashing of many mirrors. By contrast Maris, in her plain dress and hat, seemed an outsider. Ruth kept close to her, but Harvey had dashed into the dining-room, and now returned holding a glass with a little brandy. Maris gazed hard at him. There was something so strange in her face that he could not speak before her, or make the conventional proffer of the stimulant. Both he and Ruth found themselves waiting, in a sort of shivering apprehension, for her words. They were commonplace enough: "Will you tell me exactly the time?" she said to him. Harvey set the glass down on the nearest table, and began to take out his watch, glad of the trivial occupation. "Just three minutes to ten," he said, with affected ease.

"Then I must go at once," she said, looking around in a bewildered way.

The troubled eyes of her companions met, but neither found words to speak.

"I must go, must I not? There is very little time," she went on in a shriller key. Then she half-closed her burning eyes, and put her hand out sideways as if feeling for a stronger hand. "But where am I to

go? I have no money. And how can I find her all alone? "

Ruth thought that her heart would break. Who could expect to keep utter tragedy at bay, with this white face of Maris luring it? The girl was groping, blindly, for something to say, when a sound from without caught her ear.

"Hush!" she said sharply, "I thought I heard a child's voice, crying."

Harvey gave a great start. "It is only the wind. It's thick with tortured devils to-night," said he, but his head was bent to listen.

"It is a child!" screamed Ruth, and flying to the front door threw it wide.

Lisshy, with her last quiver of superhuman strength, reeled into the hallway, past Ruth's outstretched arms, into the long drawing-room, and straight to Maris. Maris caught and held her and at the instant the child lost consciousness.

But for the moment Maris did not realize this fact. Now her head went backward. Her great eyes blazed fury at the doorway. There was no enemy as yet, but soon Jane Rumbough, shivering with fear and baffled rage, darted in. Harvey threw out the barrier of his arm, and Jane clawed at him like a catamount. "Gimme that child," she screamed. "That's my child and Jim Winch's. We knowed you was comin' to steal her."

"There's no use of violence, Mrs. Winch," Harvey managed to say.

"What do you know about it, you white-eyed Yank?" shrilled the woman. "I say, give me that child. I'll have her if I cut that woman's heart out to git her."

Ruth came nearer the desperate woman. "Leave this house," she said sternly.

"It ain't your house, and you've got no more right to order me out than she has," screamed Jane, and pointed toward the still silent Maris. Suddenly the speaker burst into harsh derisive laughter. "You ain't none of you got a right!" she repeated.

"Perhaps you will concede that I have a little," said Dwight's quiet voice in the doorway.

Jane wheeled to him, dazed by the unexpected sight, then again her raucous laughter tore the room.

"You've come in good time, Mr. Alden," she announced. She pointed again toward Maris. "Do you know who that kid is, an' who's the woman holdin' it?"

"That lady is my wife," said Dwight, coming forward. "I suggest that you remember it. Now go."

"You dare send me off, — you drive me from your house, — you —" shrieked Jane, now in a frenzy. Alden's clear eyes never left her face. "Yes, for your sake as much as others, you had better go. If you have difficulties to settle, you can come to me in person."

This evidently impressed his listener. She stood still, and those about could see that she made strong effort after self-control. She drew her red lids together for keener scrutiny and after a pause drawled out: "I believe you're straight. They've kept you outer this muck. I'll trust you to do the square thing, but all the same you don't lose me this night unless you gimme yo' word that they won't be any mo' schemes fer carryin' off that kid."

Ruth touched her brother's arm. "Promise her, Dwight."

"It's fer the woman thar to add her promise," said Jane, nodding toward Maris. With her long red

neck and sharp features, Jane gave a ludicrous similitude of a pecking hen.

"I promise," said Maris, distinctly.

For the first time Dwight Alden seemed to falter, but in an instant his head was up again. "Then go," he said to Jane, and as she sidled out, let his gaze follow her.

"Thank heaven!" cried Harvey Page aloud, "and now it's up to me."

He went over swiftly to Maris, taking the child in his arms. Ruth was at his side. "Go up to my room with her," said Ruth. Harvey was moving forward, when Maris, reaching out, caught a fold of the child's ragged skirt and clung to it. "I can't be sent away from Lisshy, — I can't, — I can't," she moaned.

In the horrible silence that followed, Dwight alone had power to rally. Even before he spoke he felt the cold of a great tragedy around his heart. Yet he spoke quietly.

"Is there any reason why, because a sick child is brought into my house, I should leave it?" he asked.

It was Ruth who answered desperately: "There is, Dwight. We are all in a most terrible situation, but the child must be seen to now."

He tried to look again at Maris, to catch her eye, but she, cowering down beside Lisshy, only moaned again: "Don't send me away from her. Don't send me away."

"Ruth, — *Ruth*, —" cried out the man, and the first note of agony was in his voice. "Whose child is that?"

"It is Maris' child," sobbed Ruth.

Harvey, with his limp burden, was at the door. He turned backward a blanched and pitying face.

"I suggest, Mr. Alden, that you go to the hotel and ask for my room. I'll join you there within an hour."

Dwight turned and walked with his usual deliberate stride down the long room and out through the open door. This he shut carefully, with no sound of haste or excitement. By the time the gate was reached, Lisschy lay upon Ruth's immaculate bed, and of the three who bent above her, only one had thought for the exiled master.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A MORE SUCCESSFUL BARGAIN

THE mill village slept heavily, taking its final draught of oblivion before the week's first herald shriek of whistles. The little town of Sidon, curving the western slope and hollow of Red Horse Hill, slept, too, all but the epileptic arc-light, and four tense human souls, three of whom watched about the bedside of a child whose frail rill of life now ran, now died away, until scarcely a hint of moisture in the sand gave evidence of the immortal fluid.

The fourth soul, held motionless in its tortured clay, sat in a darkened room of the town hotel, and stared out before it, not thinking, not even trying to think, only possessing itself dully until the first agony of a hideous wound should begin to fade. Harvey did not return to his room within an hour. Lisshy's illness was too serious, but before the scream of the Regina's whistle, the child's battle with death was over, and the young physician could whisper to the wan women that there was hope.

"Then go to Dwight at once," said Ruth, and with trembling hands pushed him toward the door. He went obediently, but in a short time returned. "Alden will hear nothing from my lips," he said.

Maris turned her dull eyes from the child.

"Does he want Maris?" questioned Ruth.

"No, he refuses to hear her name. No one is to be admitted but you, Ruth."

"Then I will go," said Ruth, rising.

"And I," added Maris. "That is," she continued, turning with inquiring looks to Page, "if the doctor is not to leave Felicia."

"I'll stop, you may be sure," said Page, in a troubled way; "but really, Mrs. Alden, you are merely submitting yourself to unnecessary suffering. You will not be received."

Maris' reply to this was a tremulous smile in the direction of Ruth. The latter nodded as if to a signal, and the two hurried out.

Harvey sighed as he took his place by the bed. Lisshy was heavy with drugs, but her pulse was good. Here was no immediate anxiety, and the young man fell to pondering the events of the last few days. His lips smiled as he thought of the strength and goodness of the woman who was his. Gradually sleep overcame him, and he nodded peacefully beside the sleeping child.

Never had the night clerk at Putnam's known of such goings on! It was bad enough for men to be in and out, moving with stealthy feet and ashen faces through the hours when all decent people were asleep; but now, in the coldest, grayest hue of the morning, before the sun had turned his red cheek to the world, two veiled women crept into the dim vestibule, and seeking him, demanded the way to room No. 30 on the second floor. He directed them, of necessity, and then made a pretence of waiting to hear them knock and see them enter, but that is just what they were in no apparent haste to do. They moved down the corridor, some feet away from the door of No. 30, and the tall woman put her arms around the smaller, speaking to her in a voice so low

that the night clerk could not hear a word. Then the tall lady caught sight of him, and motioned him away with an imperious gesture, so that he had no choice but to leave.

The elevator at Putnam's never worked until seven o'clock. It was now barely six. So the clerk went sullenly down-stairs on foot, knowing that he was to see nothing.

Scarcely was he on the stairs when Ruth, alone, went up to the door. "Dwight, are you there?" she whispered.

"Is it you, Ruth? Yes, I am here."

Ruth glanced up at the glass transom. "The room is very dark."

"Yes, the room is dark."

She turned the door-knob gently. "Your door is not locked. I am coming in."

"Come," said Dwight. "I am sitting in a chair."

The two shadows glided in. One closed the door softly, and then shot the bolt.

Dwight's armchair was quite in the centre of the room. The back was to the door. At first his visitors could not see him, for he was bowed far over, his head on both his hands.

Just beyond him the one window of the room stood wide to the dawn, a square gray canvas with pallid light spread on it evenly.

"Dwight, dear brother," said Ruth, laying her hand upon his shoulder. "Some one has come with me."

As if the words had burned him, Dwight sprang to his feet, looking about angrily. "You have gone too far, Ruth. I will not see her. Didn't Page tell you —"

"Yes, — he repeated it all. I knew you would be angry. But it is Maris' right to tell you the truth."

"The truth! My God!" said the man and threw his head back with a sound meant for a laugh. "What does she know of truth?"

"Nevertheless I shall speak truth and nothing else," said Maris, in a voice so clear, so colorless, that her listeners could scarcely recognize it. The man glared at her, but she did not shrink. "As Ruth has said, it is my right, also my greatest punishment, to tell you everything."

"Maris, Maris," he burst out in a wrench of agony, "they said it was your child, — your child! — and you my wife."

Maris shivered a little, but her voice was still calm. "Are you to listen, Dwight? And may Ruth leave us for a little?"

Ruth pulled at her sleeve. "I think perhaps it is not the best time to speak," she whispered. "He is almost beside himself."

"It cannot go on a moment longer, not a second," answered Maris, aloud. "The time is now. For my own sanity, if not his, I must speak now!" For the first time a hint of frenzy was in her voice.

"Leave us, Ruth," said Alden.

Ruth turned to Maris. "I still advise against it, but if it must be —" she gave a little gesture of despair, then spoke in a more normal tone. "I shall be waiting for you outside in the corridor. I shall see that you are not disturbed."

Maris nodded, scarcely hearing. Her one desperate wish was to get Ruth from the room, and to cast from her own fainting soul the burden it had borne so long. Scarcely was the door closed before she staggered up to Dwight, heaping the facts before him as an executioner heaps fagots at a stake. In a calmer moment she might have been checked by the frozen

expression of his face, which, in the brightening day, grew every instant more hard and set. But the outburst had become, for her, primarily one of necessity. She could not weigh the effect of her words. He spoke but once throughout her narrative, a flagellating phrase, lashing her when she dared to hint of her continued devotion to himself. "Spare me, at least, that depth." From that moment she knew there was no hope. She was already a thing condemned, despised, and her very presence was contamination. Still she went on, desperately, and when she had finished, said: "Now you know everything," and threw her hands wide in a gesture of utter abnegation.

The man made no reply. By this time he was looking bored. He stepped to the door and put his hand out to open it. The miserable woman gave a cry of protest, and stared up at him. Was this to be her last look at his face? "I am going away, forever, just as soon as the child can be moved," she cried. "I am going, never to trouble you again."

Dwight bowed stiffly, as if to say that, of course, she was to go, no other plan being possible. He turned the knob and held the door open.

"Won't you say just, — good-by, — for the sake of what I have been?"

"I have never known you before," he said. "Consequently we have had no past together, you and I."

At that she left him, reeling, and he held his breath until he knew that she was safe in Ruth's arms. Then he slammed the door, locked it, and began hours of that caged pacing up and down that all strong men in agony have known.

Harvey gained admittance to him later, but Alden checked any expression of concern by the hoarse words: "You're a good fellow, Page, but no one can

help me in this ditch. I must win out alone or not at all."

"That beast, Winch, is in a pretty bad fix," ventured the young man, and tried to speak nonchalantly, lounging against the window frame. But, without seeing, he knew the fury of the other's face as Alden cried out: "I have no interest whatever in Winch or in his family. Now will you kindly leave me."

Perhaps, during the hideous day that followed, Alden was the one who suffered most. Shut to himself in a strange room, refusing food and drink, he battled, without pause. His chief demons were those of shame and wounded love. As Ruth had said, he was a proud man. That any one should have dared so to deceive him was enough for a lifelong bitterness; but that the traitor should have been his wife, his joy, his one delight, — this outrage was almost too much for Heaven itself to dare. In between the moments when he must writhe and sting with this sense of degradation, would come more subtle visions of torturing thought that Maris, — his wife, — had once been the wife of such a beast as Winch, and was the mother of a half-starved mill brat. No thought of pity for Maris had yet come to him. He was not a man who cared for children, or had an intuitive sympathy with the passion of mother-love.

Caged with a living nightmare, shut off, by his own stern will from human aid or sympathy, Dwight fought his fight alone.

With the others, Maris, Ruth and Page, there was too much to be done for isolated anguish. Not only did Lisshy's new access of fever and the inevitable wrenching of an arm already terribly inflamed require constant attention, but, as Dr. Page had said to Alden, Winch was in danger. Sorely against the will of the man, Harvey, the physician, Page, was using his best

skill to rescue the creature whose death would have been the one great boon for all.

The story of Lisshy's flight, as gathered from the somewhat incoherent utterances of Jane and her sick husband, was this. Buck McGhee had come to them offering to help them in any plans against the Aldens. With his aid and through his influence they had removed Lisshy, just at the first threat of the storm, carrying her in McGhee's spring buggy down to an empty freight-car then standing near the mill. Buck promised them that within a very few hours a freight-train would be passing, and, by a code of signals known to him and all the engineers on that branch of the road, he would have this empty car attached, and the family safely conveyed into another state. In the meantime no one would think of looking for Lisshy in a freight car.

The child, it appeared, had made bitter protest, but was finally cowed into silence.

All had gone as Buck foresaw. In less than an hour a freight-train, driven by one of Buck's particular friends, swept down the valley, and Lisshy's car was quickly attached. It was not until a certain crossing on the railroad to the west of Red Horse Hill, and nearer the residence portion of Sidon, that the first check had taken place. Buck was by this time back in his cottage, well pleased with his most recent act of villainy.

The rising storm shrieked through the wistaria and rose vines of his porch, and howled along the car-tracks in the valley, where the freight-train reluctantly came to a halt, being flagged, and warned to side-track for a special. The night was densely black, and the car where the ill-assorted little family group hid, was unlighted, even by a candle. Martin, who boasted that he could sleep through judgment

day if only he was let alone, now snored in a corner. Jane, too, must have been nodding, for a sudden apprehension made her waken and call out, "Lisshy!" There was no Lisshy. Jane began feeling about the car with outstretched hands. Martin woke up, cursing, but was soon on his feet, aiding the search. Lisshy was gone, and Jane knew, by instinct, where she would flee for shelter.

The "Special" rattled past them, and by its flashing lights they could see a road into the city. They both crawled from the car, reaching the earth just as the long train began again to move. They had started Sidon-ward together, but in the first hundred yards the man had given out, falling heavily beside the road, and roaring out to Jane: "Keep on after that damned kid." He would wait for them exactly where he was.

When Jane had finished her futile errand she went back, to find him unconscious. With some of the money given her by Maris on her first visit, she secured a conveyance from the Sidon livery-stables, and carried him back to their hovel in Red Village.

She did not get a message to Dr. Page until next day, and all through the night had nursed the man through spasms of delirium.

In his first examination Page thought the man's condition practically hopeless. Disease and cheap liquor had about done their work. He thought it more merciful to tell Jane the facts, for the woman evidently still loved the wreck she called her husband. She took the statement calmly, making the one sneering remark: "I reckon ef he did die, none o' you-all would lose yo' eyesight cryin' over him."

After a pause in which she had been gazing down steadily upon Winch's mottled and unconscious face, she asked: "How long do you give him at the most?"

Page was glad to return to professional bounds. "That's rather difficult to say, offhand. If he weathers this spell and could have first-rate care — " The woman looked up inquiringly. "By care," he explained, "I mean constant nursing, good food, and, above all, a change of climate. He might live for months, — possibly longer."

Jane's face took on a crafty eagerness. "Mout hit be even fer a year or mo', — two years, — three?" she questioned.

"Possibly," answered Harvey, with truth, and was ashamed of the way his heart sank. "But remember it would mean not only the best of nursing, but, afterward, to keep him away from liquor."

She did not seem to hear the last words; she had begun to gaze again, broodingly, on the upturned face.

"Good nussin' means a pile er money," she murmured.

"It does indeed, and then, remember, no more whiskey."

"That's the hardest job yet," she said. "Ef Jim was well, an' easy in his pockets, it 'd be the devil an' all to keep him outer barrooms."

Harvey turned toward the door. He had no intention of interesting himself in Winch's moral regeneration. "I've done all that I can for him," said the young man. "Perhaps I can look in again before night."

Jane followed him to the door. A purpose seemed to grow visible in her lean face. "Here, hold on a minute," she called to him; "I want to ast a question. Whar's that Mr. Alden to-day?"

Harvey frowned, at which a sort of smile flickered across Jane's lips. "You heerd him tell me las' night to hunt him up to-day, didn't you?"

"Look here," said Harvey, wheeling about,

"there's no use trying any blackmailing on Mr. Alden. He won't stand for it."

"Did I require any lawyer's advice?" she retorted.

"I ast you the plain question, whar's Mr. Alden?"

There was nothing for it but to answer. The woman was evidently determined to have her way.

"He is at Putnam's Hotel," said Page, and went down the steps.

"Well," called the woman after him, "you jes' say to Mr. Alden that Mis' Winch will be down to see him. I think I got somethin' to say that he'll like to hear."

Harvey drove off in the hired buggy, going directly to the stable from which it had come. He walked thence to the hotel, moving slowly. The visit to the Winches' cottage had left a most unpleasant impression, something that soiled his mind to think of, yet which persisted. He was undecided whether or not to attempt to deliver Jane's message to Mr. Alden. Perhaps he had better ask advice of Ruth. For the first time he hoped that Alden would still refuse to see him.

As he entered the marble vestibule of "Putnam's," the genial day clerk called out, "Hello, Doctor. There's a message for you from Mr. Alden. Wants you to have lunch with him in his room."

Harvey's mouth twisted with the irony of it, yet, as far as Alden was concerned, the news was good. Returning reason in a man is always accompanied with a desire to eat. The young physician made his way at once to room No. 30.

Dwight had made a careful toilet. His brushes and a few half soiled collars lay on the cheap oak dresser. As Harvey entered he was just putting a correct point to his last finger nail. His face was still ashen pale, and heavy purple circles rimmed his eyes. Yet he had, unmistakably, the air of a man

who had fought with powers of darkness, and had won.

"Beastly den, this," he said over his shoulder, as his guest entered. "I've been wondering how you stand it, day after day."

"Chiefly by spending most of my waking hours at your house," laughed Harvey. There was a menu card lying on the table, and this he now took up. "Well, what are we to have?" he went on, with a little more heartiness than was necessary: "Vermicelli Soup, — Red Snapper a la Creole, — that's decent, I've tried it. Broiled steak, — run if you see it coming. Cold ham, — that's always eatable; and there's one thing about this joint, — they can make coffee!"

"It all sounds good to me," returned Alden. "Suppose I ring and you order."

He seated himself opposite Harvey, and looked squarely at him. There was something so clear, and at the same time so deep in the steady gray eyes, that a thought came to Harvey: "No wonder the poor little woman is half mad at losing him," and then a second thought: "But how did she dare to trifle with such a force."

"I'm glad to have you here, old man," Alden was saying. "The truth is I have had a bit too much of my own society."

"Does wear a bit on a chap, you know," returned the other, with a most affected, plushy English accent. Both men laughed, and Alden in his heart was touched and grateful for the kindly fooling.

During luncheon they spoke of the most ordinary topics, Alden giving a witty account of his recent adventures among some congressmen at the capital. The discussing of mill reforms was a safe ground for both.

"I've become convinced," said Alden, "that a great number of these so called abuses can be stopped, not only without eventual loss of percentage, but with definite increase. But things move slowly down here. You can't do everything at once. As one old reb remarked: 'God A'mighty kain't drive six horses abreast through one small door, but a fool can shoo 'em in one at a time.' So we've decided to 'shoo' the biggest, — that of apprenticing children under legal age."

"But an age limit law already exists, doesn't it?" said the other.

"Yes; it isn't the law, it's the difficulty of enforcing. If all millowners would personally see to this part of it, this particular cause of blame would soon cease."

"But there must have been some opposition, — there always is," said Page.

"Oh, plenty of it, — and the opposing point of view is working strongly in congress, especially where some of the congressmen are stockholders in mills. They contend that the children are better off working than running wild, and that the country people won't move into the villages unless children can be put to work to help out the family income. It does seem as if there were some pretty awful parents down here."

"Yes, I've noticed it," said the other, and relapsed into silence. Dwight drew out his cigarette case, lighted a small tube, and leaned back in his chair. Page did not smoke. For a long time both men were wordless, but each knew of what the other thought.

Page determined to change the vibrations. He leaned forward on the table, and the heightening of color in his smooth cheeks made him seem younger and more boyish than ever. "Say, Alden, I must deliver a message, — no, not from your wife," he hastened to say, in response to a kindling glance across

the table. "It is from that harpy who was in your house last night."

Alden's face had instantly resumed its indifferent calm. He now took out his cigarette, again, flipped off the end with care, and remained gazing at the glowing dot of fire for so long an interval that Harvey finally jogged him with the remark: "You said something about her looking you up, you know."

"Yes," said Alden, "I recall my words clearly. What does she want?"

"To call here upon you, and have her say out. She hints that she has some information that you will want to get."

"I'll see her when she comes," said Alden, and leaned back with the air of one who dismisses an unpleasant topic.

"Thank the Lord that's dropped," cried Harvey fervently. "Now there's something else, — oh, don't frown, — it's still a different pair of shoes. It's about your sister, and — er, — well to be frank, — and yours truly." Harvey's blushes would have done credit to a schoolgirl. "Will it be indelicate for me to speak of it just now?"

"Why should it be more inappropriate now than at another time?" answered Dwight, his face softening to a smile. "Fire ahead, — though of course I know already."

"Well, it is so!" said Harvey, ambiguously, but with delight. "I can hardly believe it yet. It's too good to be true. But she has said 'yes.' And now, if you feel all right toward it —"

Alden put his hand out, and the young man seized it in both of his, nearly overturning a coffee cup to do so. "I'm the luckiest chap on earth!" he vaunted.

"Yes, you are lucky," said the other, thoughtfully. "Ruth is a woman incapable of deceit." The

sudden pain in the dark-rimmed eyes hurt Harvey like a blow. Because he could do nothing else he rose, still holding Alden's hand, and saying: "You won't mind, I know, if I hurry off to her. The luncheon was thoroughly enjoyed."

"Not in the least," said Alden to the earlier part of his sentence. "And Page, as you go out, please say to the clerk that I would like something in the nature of a sitting-room or private parlor on this same floor. I can't receive the woman here."

Again left to himself, Alden began his pacing up and down, but this time it was the steady measured stride of thought, not the inconsequent hurtling of a wounded animal.

He was a good judge of character in men, and, until this dreadful event, had thought himself capable of reading women also. Yet now he had failed to know the creature nearest him and best beloved. This had done much to shake his self-confidence, but had not altogether destroyed it. He tried to bring together, as a whole, what facts of the case he knew, treating the matter as impersonally as his wounds would allow. Maris he believed to have spoken absolute truth to him, so far as she knew the truth. She may have left things unsaid, but what she had uttered dripped with the waters of truth. Jane and Winch were beings of another world. It was more than possible that they were in possession of facts of which Maris had not a suspicion. Some such information it must surely be Jane's wish to sell. He found himself waiting with impatience for the woman's coming.

When finally she appeared and he noted that she had not taken the slightest pains to disguise her profession or her poverty, and that she entered the tawdry "parlor" a room to her inevitably palatial, with a lofty indifference to its splendors, something like re-

spect for her barren pride rose up in him. The ever-present snuff-stick protruded from a corner of her discolored lips, and her pale eyes met his with steadiness.

"Will you be seated?" he said, as to a lady, and put forward a chair. When she had taken it he drew another near. "Dr. Page told me that you had something of importance to say," he began.

"You'll find it important enough, I reckon."

"I must warn you, before beginning," he said, in the same ordinary tone, "that you must not speak familiarly or disrespectfully of my wife, — of Mrs. Alden."

Jane's faded eyes gave him a look in which both defiance and admiration gleamed. Then she answered drily: "I'll remember. I was her servant wunst."

He waited for her next words, but these, apparently, were difficult to fashion. With her eyes still on him she let her hands creep up to her flat chest, and remain there. Dwight thought he heard the faint rustle of paper.

"Have they told ye, — have they told ye," she demanded, "that Jim Martin's like to die?"

"No. I wished to hear nothing of him."

"Well, you'll listen now. He's sick, and he might have died, — but he won't die now. I'll see to that. Don't you count any too heavy on his dyin'."

Alden's nostrils twitched. "It is not of the slightest interest to me whether he lives or dies."

"Well, it is to me," she retorted angrily. "Sorry ez he is, he's all I got. I giv' up as much to him as any fine lady has got to give. He is not to die jes' in the nick of time fer you an' — her!"

Dwight gave a gesture of disgust. "You said you had something of importance," he suggested.

"I'm comin' to that! I'm comin' to that," said the woman, her excitement rising steadily. "But you got to tell me first, whether you love her yet, — whether you'd *pay* to have her yourn again, with all this mess wiped out!"

"Have you no sense at all?" cried the man fiercely. "I told you not to speak of her." Out of his white face his eyes burned like torches.

The woman laughed shrilly and beat upon the table with her lean hands. "You love her fast enough," she triumphed. "Oh, she's that kind! Once she gets in your heart you kin no more dig her out than you kin dig the wick from a lamp and leave it burnin'. It's so with 'em all. Even if you hate her and do her wrong, you can't ferget. Why, even that Winch who lef' her —"

Dwight sprang to his feet, and struck at a chair so fiercely that it went over with a crash.

"Leave this room," he commanded.

But Jane only laughed again, an acid sound, and crouched down close to the table. Triumph glittered in her eyes. "You love her! You love her!" she taunted. "It's yo' love an' yo' pridefulness that's been lockin' horns together. Now ef I could tell you something that could ease yo' pridefulness —" she paused, watching, — her tone suspended.

After a brief struggle he turned his face to her. "What is it that a creature like you could tell that would alter the fact of her marriage, or change what I have been these five years past." He closed his eyes for an instant, overcome by a sudden wave of shame, and whispered: "I who have believed myself an honorable man!"

"It's jes' that pint whar maybe I kin help," Jane answered eagerly. "Supposin', — now jes' supposin', mind you, — that I could prove you had been

her husband all along, an' she herse'f didn't know." She threw her hands out with a gesture meant to check, and cried shrilly: "But, min' you, I said jes' supposin'!"

Alden stood very still. At last he had seized a clue to the woman's secret. His quick mind ran, like fire, across a field of possibilities, but in the midst of the heat he stood erect and calm, and heard himself asking, in a professional voice: "Do you wish me to infer that something in the nature of a divorce was procured, secretly, against my wife?"

Jane's terror flared. "No, I don't," she screamed. "An' don't you dare to say I told you! I didn't say a thing of that sort; I only ast you, 'supposin'.'"

Dwight waited for her excitement to fade. "I wish to take no advantage of you, Mrs. Winch," he said quietly, "if you have anything you wish me to know I will wait patiently until you have spoken in your own way. You may trust me, absolutely."

Jane leaned back in her chair, her eyes darting furtive, searching looks at him, her thin hands twisting and intertwisting in her lap. She still shivered with the fear of having betrayed too much. Her next words showed a supreme effort for self-control.

"Suppose, then, that such a thing as you jes' said, *had* been done. Mind you, I ain't sayin' yet that it has, — but *ef'n* it had, and it was legal and bindin' all right," here again one clawlike hand went up to her breast, "how much would it mean to you in dollars and cents?"

Dwight considered for a long moment. "If such a paper is to be bought," he said, "I will give for it, in cash, five thousand dollars."

Jane caught her breath. "Five — thousand — whole — dollars!" she breathed. The wages of her best days had sometimes reached the splendid height

of one dollar and sixty cents. Now that she was beginning to go blind, her day's work seldom reached a dollar. She had faced disgrace and poverty and cruel overwork without comment, but now at the thought of what seemed to her untold wealth, her nerves threatened to collapse. Dwight watched the twitching face with compassion.

"Five thousand dollars," she whispered, as if in awe. "An' ef Jim lived jes' one year, how much would that be for every day?"

"Somewhere about twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five dollars to count on fer every day," she murmured, in the same awestruck tone. Then she roused a little. "Supposin' he lived two years, that would make it come to jes' half of twenty-five, — twelve an' a half. Why," she cried, her eyes brightening, "even ef we both lived three years, it would come to somethin' like eight dollars, wouldn't it?"

Alden could only nod. A strange stinging was under his lids. There was something heartbreaking in this tremulous calculation for life, in a woman already near the point of human endurance. And after all, her chief thought was for the man who had dragged her down. No slime of sin could take away all dignity from such fidelity.

"Well," said Alden gently, "do you agree?"

"Yes," cried Jane instantly, "though Jim Winch tries to kill me fer it, I agree!" She thrust her hand into the front of her calico gown, and dragged forth a dingy and discolored envelope. This she flung upon the table, with the announcement: "It's a dy-vo'ce. I made him git it out thar when my baby was a-comin'. It's straight enough. Nob'dy kin fight it but her-sef', an' she won't need to do that, now she's stole Lisshy."

Alden took up the paper with a thrill of loathing mixed with his well suppressed excitement. He looked intently at the thing for a moment, and then, without opening, flung it down to the marble slab of the table.

"Ain't you goin' to read it?" asked the woman, amazed.

"No, I believe what you have said. But tell me, how is it that after he had secured this release from her, the man Winch still wished her to think him dead?"

For the first time the woman's eyes fell. "Well, I don't know jes' how it come about myself. My little kid died, an' I suppose I wanted to keep a tight hold on Lisshy. Then Jim fell to drinkin', an' in his cups, he used to rail at Maris, — Miss Maris, —" she corrected herself, "an' he seemed to want to get her into trouble by marryin' again, thinkin' him dead an' not knowin' of the paper."

"That's of little importance now," said Alden, with a gesture of repulsion. "But there is just one more question, — are you certain that she, — my wife, — knows nothing, and has never known about the existence of this paper?"

"What's that to you now?" said Jane sharply. "A bargain is a bargain. I'd like what cash you kin spare."

"Oh, I have plenty to give you," said the man a little wearily. "You need not fear being cheated. There's more than a hundred in this roll," he said, taking a roll of bills from his pocket and tossing it across the table. "And I will write you a check before you leave."

Jane snatched at the green cylinder of bills. Her gaunt fingers fumbled at the rubber band about them. Finally she gave up the task, and looking squarely

at Alden, said to him, "She does know about the paper now. Jim took it to her house, thinkin' to strike up a bargain."

"Ah," said Dwight, and the exclamation was a breath of pain. This was the one thing Maris had not told him. "Did Winch make the same proposition to her that you have made to me?"

"He tried to, but she wouldn't let him git very far. She said" — Jane hesitated, and the crafty look came back to her face.

"Go on," said Alden. "Here's my check-book —"

"You're plum sure it won't make no difference in our bargain?"

"Absolutely. You have my word of honor."

"She said that no paper could make any diff'unce, ez long ez Winch lived. That she keered too much fer you, to go on bein' your wife."

Dwight had hard work to keep his voice from shaking. "You are sure she knew the paper to be legal, — that Winch had got a divorce before she ever married me?"

"Winch even offered to give up Lisshy without a word, if she'd give in," Jane answered evasively.

"She refused that, too."

"Yes, she said she keered too much."

Alden rose to his feet and walked the length of the narrow room. Jane had untied the roll at last, and was busy counting bills. Now she rose also. "This here's enough to begin with," she announced. "I'll come back when this is spent."

"Yes, — and, — thank you for your confidence," said the man at the far end of the room. His voice was curiously muffled. Jane stood looking at his averted figure. Her faded eyes almost twinkled, then a more human look crept into them. "I don't wonder that the poor thing loves him," she said to

herself. At the door she paused again. Alden's attitude had not changed.

"Well, good-by, Mr. Alden," she called out. Then she added, and her voice was almost tender: "You cain't dig her out! 'Taint no use to try it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A MESSAGE

ALDEN went slowly back to the little bedchamber, Room 30, which was, at present, the sole property and the personal abode of Harvey Page. Alden had not, as yet, taken in this fact. But for his bath and a freshening of his toilet at the noon hour there had been for him no thought of the outward formulæ of material existence.

Now finding himself in surroundings which, already, had begun to acquire a faint, hideous familiarity, he went, by a sort of instinct, to the armchair facing the one window, the spot where he had sat in torment throughout the preceding night. A more imaginative man would have likened it to one of those torture chairs lined with spikes into which mediæval offenders were forced. Dwight chose it now partly because of its suggestion of familiarity, but chiefly because it was comfortable.

A loathsome object was held loosely in his left hand. He knew that he must read the thing, poring over each phrase for a hidden flaw, and his very eyes felt sick with the task before them. He glanced down once at the paper, gave a small shudder of disgust, and threw it backward to the table, letting it lie as it had chanced to fall. He sat on in the dark a little longer, nerving himself to the performance.

It had been said of Alden among northern asso-

ciates that in making of himself a fine business man he had spoiled a better lawyer. All forms of law attracted him, and the litigations of his firm had always been under his direct supervision. He knew that one careful reading of the paper he had bought would convince him of its futility or of its worth. Jane's belief in its value he could not doubt; nor indeed, for himself, was there any appreciable mistrust that it would prove both valid and efficacious. Still, in such a matter, he must be sure, and it was a proof of his overwrought state of mind that he had been willing to agree to the bargain without demanding previous examination.

After an interval he rose, went to the window and pulled down the two sets of shades. After a nervous twitch to bring the cheap lace curtains closer, he recrossed the room, searching for the electric switch-board. This he had not needed to use before. A hard glare from unshaded electric bulbs flooded, at his touch, the tawdry room. He drew a straight chair to the table, opened the paper, and began to study intently. A second reading followed. After a few moments more of brooding he returned the document to its envelope, rose, walked to the switch-board to extinguish the light, and found his way again, through darkness, to the big chair.

The paper had revealed no flaws. Sordid and revolting as such a thing of necessity must be, it was, in legal standing, unimpeachable. The man had procured a divorce from Maris on the ground that she had deserted him, refusing to live longer as his wife. No mention was made of little Felicia. Had Maris known at the time of this move against her, she could easily have attacked and overcome the decree, but that the victim should be kept in ignorance had been, evidently, the chief desire of the Winches and their

lawyer. At any rate it was now clear that Maris had been a free woman when she had become his wife, three years before, and this fact, in itself, was enough to turn threatened disgrace into security.

The prodding spikes of the torture chair melted one by one. There were still a few knotty excrescences, such as the problem of Felicia's future, and the dark memory that Maris had deceived him; but Dwight began to feel that these could be endured. Silence he had already purchased. The world at large need never know that Felicia were other than an ordinary mill child whom Maris' charity had led her to adopt. For the final and most vital issue, he was still, as he had always been since their marriage, Maris' husband in the law, as well as through the bonds of a deep and passionate affection. There need be no further thought of separation from the woman he loved.

The woman he loved! The phrase blew dreamily across his consciousness, and for the first moment since he entered Putnam's door, his lips felt as if they tried to smile. A later vision arose, the face of the gaunt, pathetic servant woman from whom he had parted so recently. Again he heard her drawling words: "You cain't dig her out!"

"That is true enough," he said aloud, and this time his lips achieved their smile.

Strangely enough, in all this readjustment of recent events, the visit that Maris and his sister Ruth had forced on him at dawn played practically no part. It was later that he had begun to gain self-mastery. When he strove to recall the interview, he found the scenes distorted in a haze of crimson mist, shot through with flashes of sharp pain. He realized now that he had been beside himself, and felt more than a vague uneasiness as to his own behavior. Yet

Maris, he felt, would forgive him any impetuous cruelty. Had she not often said that he could do nothing which she would not forgive?

For an hour he sat on, planning, rearranging, deciding, and steadily he felt himself increase in confidence. When, about nine, Harvey came in, Dwight had already relighted the glaring bulbs, and was reading a newspaper. He sprang up at the young man's knock, and, as he entered, called out heartily: "Glad you are back, old man! I want you to help fix me up in a room of my own; one with a private bath and sitting-room, if possible."

Harvey had taken a light supper with Ruth; but, nevertheless, Dwight insisted upon claiming him as his guest at a second repast. Wine was ordered, and whatever delicacies the hotel and the season could be brought to yield.

At first the conversation moved through a medium of faint embarrassment; but, after his good dinner and irreproachable cigar, Dwight flung aside convention, and yielded to the rare luxury of a confidential talk. To all Harvey listened with a quiet sympathy that did much to enhance the elder man's incipient liking. The account of the interview with Jane, and the purchase of the paper, brought out the impulsive remark: "By George! and to think how long they have deliberately kept the poor little woman in ignorance!"

"I have always said that our hodgepodge divorce laws were a disgrace to civilization," Dwight said thoughtfully, after a pause. "But in this one case good seems to have come from evil."

The young physician puffed away at the luxury of a perfect Havana. At length he asked: "And Martin, when he went to your house, tried to bribe Mrs. Alden with this same paper?"

"As I understand it, he did not display the document, or even get to the point of making a full proposition. Why, the Winch woman in her interview with me fenced for five minutes before she would admit the existence of the paper. Both she and her wretched husband are well aware of its value, you may be sure." Here the speaker's lips came tightly together, and his smooth jaw squared. His brows drew downward so that he scowled as he went on, angrily: "I can fancy just what sort of threats and innuendoes the brute employed. Such a woman as Maris was, of course, powerless either to understand or to protect herself. She knows no more of law and base human nature than an infant in arms. Every one can impose upon her, and it is certain that those Kansas lawyers she picked up were low-browed shysters of the worst variety."

"Yes," said Harvey gently, "it has been something like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. I am thankful that things are coming out all right for her at last."

The other's face had softened with the name and at the thought of Maris. "I am going to try my best to make it up to her," he said in a low, almost a caressing voice. "I shall even try to tolerate Winch's child. A man couldn't do much more than that!"

"No," answered Harvey slowly, "I suppose he couldn't!" Then as the other glanced upward he added, somewhat abruptly: "When do you expect to speak with Mrs. Alden?"

"In the morning, — just as early as possible."

"Dr. Singleterry's funeral is at eleven," said Page, "and they are sending his body on by the twelve o'clock passenger to Orbury, North Carolina."

Alden nodded. "Yes, I supposed they would. My wife was a child in Orbury."

"Of course Mrs. Alden feels his death keenly, especially at a time like this," Harvey went on. "To tell you the truth, she is in a frightfully overwrought nervous condition, and had better not be excited any more just yet. Suppose you put it off a bit," he suggested, tentatively.

"Put it off! Until when?" said Alden, frowning. "It doesn't seem to me that delays are in order just at present. Good God, man!" he burst out, as the other hesitated, "don't you see it's a matter of taking us both off the rack? I'll wait until to-morrow afternoon, then, at six. You mustn't expect any more from me. Please give Maris that message—to-morrow, at six precisely, — in my study." With the last words he had risen, and now began an impatient pacing up and down.

Page sat on stolidly. Suddenly the other paused beside him, put a strong, nervous hand upon his unresisting shoulder, and shook him with pretended ferocity. "Here, banish those solemn looks!" he cried, trying to laugh naturally. "I tell you I know what is best for me and Maris. It wouldn't be right to her to accept delay. You will take my message?"

Harvey got to his feet with some deliberation. "I still think that waiting would be best," he began. "No, don't glare at me! I'll give up my opinion. I'll take the message."

Excitement filled the air of Sidon: and gossip, its necessary consequence, buzzed as aimlessly as snow-mist on a windless day.

The sudden death of Dr. Singleterry, the seizing of the injured Winch child from her parents, the disappearance of Buck McGhee; and, by Dwight Alden, the open abandonment of his home, bore, to the popular mind, more than a hint of interdependence.

There were blocks enough to build with and yet, in spite of untiring effort, the parts refused to fit. Dr. Singleterry's dramatic death following his impassioned arraignment of child-labor might have stirred the two Alden women to a spasm of remorse which found outlet in the rescue of an injured child; and Mr. Alden might, naturally enough, have disapproved and shown in this way his protest. These parts of the problem fell into place. But why should Buck McGhee have disappeared; and what was the cause of the sudden illness of the man Winch? Some of the mill whisperers had it that Dr. Page, the young New York physician, obviously in love with Ruth Alden, had forced an entrance to Winch's cottage and beaten the man into insensibility. Others knew that this was untrue, for they had seen the Winches, with the sick child, drive off in Buck McGhee's buggy. And why, if there was warfare between the Winch and Alden factions, should the young physician be coming to attend Winch?

The social element of Red Village not being, either by birth or training, capable of controlling curiosity, had shamelessly plied Jane with questions. Mill-workers, usually reliable, had "knocked off" this Monday, only that, according to their version of the case, they might "set a spell with Miss Winch, an' help her nuss Jim." But Jane, narrowing her faded eyes, had repelled all advances.

The fashionable contingent of Sidon, dwellers beyond Red Horse Hill, were more restrained, if equally curious. But they, unlike the Red Villagers, had an immediate duty in hand with the preparations for Dr. Singleterry's funeral. According to the wish expressed during his last utterance, his body was to be sent to Orbury.

Added to the two social factions mentioned, there

was a dusky third, a nomadic third, that of the colored servant population of the town. The interest-centre of this alert assemblage might be found in the Alden's kitchen-wing. It was remarkable how many small pretexts were evolved for gaining even a momentary entrance. The milkman who, heretofore, had never condescended to alight from his hooded throne, was seized with a burning thirst for hydrant water, and hurried up the kitchen steps with the alacrity of a modern Tantalus, just released. Daughters of the Shining Doves, on spread pinions of curiosity, flocked Aunt Mandy-ward, and friends of Archer and Poline "Jes' thought they'd drap in fer a minute," with a most surprising uniformity of motive.

In the midst of it Aunt Mandy, ponderous, reticent, disdainful, moved about her usual duties. To none would she vouchsafe a personal opinion, except in a few disjointed grunts of the uncomfortable import that: "It was de white folks' business, and she couldn't see why all the niggers in Zion was wagglin' dey fool tongues out over it nohow!"

Perhaps it was to revenge this humiliating racial attitude on the part of the old-fashioned servant that the two younger ones were eager to impart all that they knew, and much that they did not. Under a fire of questioning, they revelled in suggestions of more important knowledge withheld. The side glances, broken exclamations, and gestures of Poline might have done service in mediæval Florence. It was a fact, indeed, that the keen-witted mulatto girl felt certain that there was more involved in the situation than the saving of one poor child.

When out of the kitchen, she went about the house with stealthy feet, and was rewarded by more than one exciting and baffling phrase.

She gathered, beyond doubt, that Mr. Alden in-

tended remaining for the present at Putnam's hotel, and that his reason for doing so was anger against his wife. From some of Maris' sobbing words to Ruth, she knew that her mistress intended taking the sick child to Orbury, where the old minister was to be buried, just as soon as the little invalid could safely make the journey. Beyond these beliefs Poline must enter the pleasant forest of imagination, and such was her dexterous use of talent, that, by Monday night, half of the town strayed thither in her company.

When Dr. Singleterry's funeral services took place at Sidon, Maris, very slender and pale in her black gown, sat through the ceremony without apparent emotion. Her thoughts were, for the most part, leagues away from her surroundings. It seemed to her of little importance that the frail shell of what had been a holy man lay quiet before her, under the heaped-up flowers. She knew that his spirit was free, and had already added to her strength. Because of brooding thoughts she had not seen that Dwight Alden, standing in a side aisle of the crowded church, had kept his eyes upon her.

It was well for her that she did not know. She had accepted already the fact that Dwight had cast her off. In a dazed way she realized that she might never again see his face, yet had she been able to put her own thoughts clearly she would have said that, between her and Dwight, better disgrace, absence, and a total casting off than that he should be the one to lie quiet under flowers. It is only old age and a religious pre-resignation of the things of life that makes death endurable. Maris loved her husband with the strength of a woman at once weak and passionate, but she would have given him into the arms of another wife, she would have abased and degraded

herself to the last verge of suffering, only to have him on the earth alive.

She knelt and rose mechanically. The words of the burial service, usually so full, to her, of majesty, went by unheeded. She had begun to revolve, in her own way, the present situation. It was only at intervals like this that she was able to control her thoughts, and she could not let the opportunity pass.

Just before leaving the house, — Dwight Alden's house, — she had sought out Dr. Page, who, it had seemed to her, had rather deliberately avoided her vicinity. She wished to learn of him the earliest possible date at which she and Felicia could make the trip to Orbury. For it was to Orbury that she, with Ruth's sanction and approval, had decided she would go. There would be at least one friend, — the minister, — awaiting them. With this objective point settled, it was characteristic of Maris that she should begin to feel the nervous tension of impatience to depart. Her chief thought in this was the humiliation being hourly endured by keeping Dwight Alden from his own home.

Dr. Page, after a slight hesitation, had said to her that Felicia could possibly travel by the end of another week.

Maris, searching his face had cried out: "You do not seem to approve! Will the climate of North Carolina not be good for Felicia?"

"The best possible," said Page. "It isn't that."

"Perhaps you were wondering how I could afford to go anywhere," said Maris next, with a deep flush. "It is dear Ruth's splendid generosity —"

He checked her by a gesture. "No, — no, that has nothing to do with it. I must not say more just now. We will talk it over when you get back."

With this she was forced to be satisfied. She re-

called now, in church, each word of the young physician, and wondered again at the suppressed excitement of his manner. Clearly there was something of importance to say. He had been at the hotel with Dwight. Could there be any word from him? But no, — she must hope nothing there. Had he not said to her in person, in that dreadful gray dawn hour: "We have had no past together, — you and I."

Perhaps Harvey had been thinking of the one great menace to Felicia's recovery that still remained, — the watchful enmity of Winch and Jane. The man, she knew, was ill, and in all probability would not be able to follow her; but Jane, — that gaunt, famished, sinful Nemesis called Jane, — what would she not risk and dare!

The terror of this image brought back to Maris the old dizziness, and warned her to cease all thought and planning until the throbbing ache at the base of her brain should begin to fade. She leaned back, and slowly closed her aching lids. At the moment the organ began the prelude to a familiar hymn, and, with the soothing of it a peace, almost of oblivion, drew about her.

When the services were complete Maris rose among the first, and followed, quite closely, the dark casket upon which merciful flowers were still heaped. She retained, yet, a partial numbness of sensation, the reaction of her recent agitation, and had not noticed that in her present line of advance, she must inevitably brush against Dwight, who, as though to force the situation, stood motionless at one side of the doorway.

He had been watching her steadily, and, as she approached, braced himself for the encounter. She, on the contrary, had for the moment forgotten his

existence, so great was her present stress of thought, and as she brushed his arm it was, to her, as a shock of fire. She started, and gave a cry so low that none but her husband heard, then flung her head backward, and for one superlative moment their eyes met.

Felicia was always conscious now. In spite of the pain which still lingered in the injured arm, she felt herself part of an existence more beautiful than her most fantastic dream. With the unquestioning optimism of a child, she appropriated all the love and care now heaped upon her. She knew well where she was, that it was the wife and sister, of her "mill boss" who were now so good to her. She had still a reservation of fear and possible mistrust for the doctor who insisted, every day, upon examining her arm and making it hurt, but even this shadow of antipathy was fading. Both Page and Ruth were fitted to do more for her than the inexperienced Maris, yet it was when the latter left the room that Felicia's eyes followed hungrily, and so long as she was away, watched with a look that would brighten or grow sad as it chanced that a newcomer was or was not Maris.

This morning she had been told that "Lady," as she insisted upon calling Maris, had gone to the good old minister's funeral, and must be away for some length of time. By the end of an hour she had begun to question, wistfully: "Ain't Lady come back yet?" or to ask of Ruth: "Do you mind jes' lookin' outer de window jes' wunst more, Miss Ruth, to see ef church ain't lettin' out yit?"

When finally the opening of the front door and the respectful greeting of Archer announced that the mistress had returned, Felicia was heard to cry out joyously: "It's her, — it's Lady!" The child's

slim body, weighted with its bandaged arm, literally vibrated with impatience. Her brightening eyes seemed to count each step as Maris ascended, and when she heard the level of the hall attained, and still Maris did not open the sick-room door, a look of troubled disappointment clouded her face, and she besought Ruth to "Go see if Lady's taken sick."

Ruth, herself a little apprehensive, hurried into the dressing-room that Maris still occupied, and found a black-robed figure, flung face down its full length upon the couch, shaking with convulsive sobs.

"Was it so trying, dear?" Ruth asked.

"No — not the funeral. That was a thing of peace and beauty. I'm not crying over that! Oh, Ruth, Ruth!" here she sat upright, and turned drowned yet luminous eyes to her companion. "It's Dwight! I saw him there. I brushed by him, touching him, — yes, actually touching him. He looked at me —" Here the sobs had to be fought again. In the interval Ruth, trying to help, asked gently: "And how did he seem, dear?"

"Not harsh and cold as he did in that awful place yesterday," answered Maris, when she could speak again. "It was a strange look, but it was not cruel, only deep and sad and — I don't know what to think of it, Ruth, only it caught my heart like hands and wrung it, — so!" she cried more passionately, suiting the words to a frantic wringing of black-gloved fingers. "That's why I am so terribly unnerved again. I wish I had not seen him. No! I don't mean that, — I am thankful, — thankful to have met his dear eyes again, even if it makes things harder afterward." Here, in her excitement, she rose and stood facing Ruth with eyes from which the new glory was swiftly drying all trace of tears.

Ruth returned the look eagerly, and once had

opened her lips to speak. Harvey had, of course, told her everything. Ruth longed to deliver the message, but checked herself, knowing that Harvey would prefer choosing for himself the best possible moment. So, instead of the words she longed to speak, she said, as quietly as she could: "I don't wonder at your agitation, dear, but you must try to put it aside just now. Felicia needs you. We fear she may fret herself into a fever."

Maris put her two palms to her temple. "Felicia?" she repeated, in the voice one uses for an unfamiliar name. She stared on, for an instant longer, as one suddenly awakened, then with a cry hurried toward the door. "My baby, — my poor baby," Ruth heard the flying figure whisper.

"O, Lady, you wuz such a *norful* time comin' back," Felicia wailed, at sight of the longed-for visitor.

"Yes, dear," said Maris. "I loved the old minister very much, you know."

Lisshy pondered. "Somehow I didn't think that ministers could go dead, like other folks," she said, in her slow, sweet drawl. "Hit seems as ef God oughter take keer o' them kind."

"Why, He does, you funny little chicken," said Maris. "It is not being unkind when the dear Father gives them rest after a long life of work. Even a minister gets very tired and wants to rest."

Lisshy drew a long, reminiscent sigh. "Do people that don't have to work in mills git tired, too?"

"Indeed they do, my darling; and some of us get tired out doing things much less brave and fine than working in the mills."

This was too new a thought for Lisshy to take in all at once. She shut her eyes a little wearily. In the interval the two women again exchanged glances,

and Maris made a gesture for the other to be seated. Ruth shook her head in refusal, and was about to speak when Lisshy's thin voice rose: "'Ud you mind singin' me that little song again, Lady? "

"Which song, dear? "

"Sumpin' about 'Sleep baby sleep'; an' don't fergit to take de boat back. Of course," she added, in some embarrassment, looking from Maris' face to Ruth's: "I know hit's only a kid song; but, somehow, when you're down sick wid somethin' hurtin', hit sounds powerful good."

While she was speaking the sound of a clicking gate could be heard through the opened window, followed by rapid footsteps along the cemented walk. Ruth betrayed an instant alertness.

"Evidently I am not wanted here," she remarked jocosely. "I think I will try to find a more appreciative spot."

"It's coming up the walk now," said Maris, mischievously. "Go down to it, but after a while bring it up to us, won't you? "

Ruth flaunted indignantly from the room, her dimple twinkling.

When she had reached the lower floor, and the greeting between herself and Harvey was over, Maris rose and went in search of a low rocking-chair. She dragged it to Lisshy's bedside, placing it as close as possible.

"Now we are all to ourselves," she said, patting the hand that lay near. "And now I am going to sing just what you want, until you are tired out, and beg me to stop."

Felicia did not try to answer. The life of the mills breeds silence in a child; but she let all the love of her starved soul brim the eyes turned upon Maris, so that the woman shivered, and had to lean forward

under pretext of arranging the bedclothes, in order to retain enough control for singing.

Maris' voice had never been trained, but nature had given her certain thrush-notes that pierced a listener's heart with sweetness. Perhaps it was this very inequality of voice that made the notes stand out, like white lilies springing above a bed of weeds.

Maris sang the well-known verses through, letting the last tender cadence fade into a silence that itself had become unuttered music. The child attempted no word of thanks, only, with an indrawn sigh of rapture, pleaded "Jes' wunst mo'."

"The same song over again?" questioned Maris, smiling.

"Yes," said Lisshy's eyes, and Maris sang.

Now Lisshy bestirred herself. Her wan little face took on the look of eagerness which Maris was beginning to recognize as the sign of interest suddenly aroused. She leaned forward, her own eyes lambent with encouragement and love.

"What is it, darling?"

"I sho' do like that song," drawled Lisshy. Then she asked, more shyly: "Was de kid's mother skeered hit moun't ever come back?"

"Yes; that is the sort of thing all real mothers are afraid of," said Maris, biting her lips to stop their trembling.

Lisshy frowned. Troubled thoughts were evidently crowding in. Maris knew that she was thinking of the gaunt, unlovely Jane. Suddenly the child turned her face, and, speaking with a little rush of excitement, said: "Lady, would you min' singin' dat same one jes' *wunst* mo'? I promise not to ask agin. I don't want to hear no yudder one to-day."

Maris sang, and this time it was necessary to keep

her eyelids down, for fear that Felicia's small face and what it said might stop all singing. Even to the singer's own careless ears some of the lingering notes of Jessie Gaynor's exquisite melody had an unearthly, almost an unbearable sweetness.

When it was at an end the child lay so very still that Maris thought she must be sleeping. A sort of tender apathy fell on the mother, also, and she leaned back, her eyes closed, her head against a chair. For a small time she rested thus, unthinking; then the troubled waking dreams began to come. She let her fancy wander into realms that never could have existed. Perhaps the maddest and the most tormenting thought was this, — if Lisshy could only, by some inconceivable magic, be her child and Dwight's. Other women, — many, many women, — had such a supreme glory as this in their lives, the love of an idolized husband, a clean and flawless past that all were free to look upon, and the joy of a little child. Yet she had heard just such women cry out against their lives, and the petty annoyances of every day. In their hearts such women must be happy, though they did not realize it. She tried to picture to herself how a really happy woman must feel. It seemed to her now that if she could be such an one, she would have thanked God, aloud, each time that she saw her image in the glass, or the look of her own eyes reflected in the up-turned faces of her children. It had always been Maris' way to plan ahead for a better period when this or that crisis was to be past, — to make great resolutions which, to be truthful, were very seldom kept. She said to herself, now, that when she was finally driven forth from Eden, she and her child, and the angel with the sword of fire barred re-entrance, she would go out into the world to seek such happy women, and exhort them to realize their own blessedness.

Her mind went from one to another of her friends who were happy, unmenaced women. She, too, was a mother. Annunciation had touched her, also; but what, in this dark present, had her motherhood to give or to receive? Even though Felicia were to live, what future stretched before the child? "At least," thought the unhappy woman, "it cannot be as sorrowful as what has been."

"Lady," came Felicia's low voice from the bed, "do you know, whilst you was singin', I mos' went to sleep, — not all the way, jes' half. An' I sho did feel funny."

Maris saw that the child labored to express some unusual emotion, and that she was not quite sure how her confidence was to be received.

"Tell me about it, dear," she said gently. "I would like to hear everything. In what way did it feel funny?"

Lisshy opened her eyes and gave a long, long look, the look of a child instinctively skeptical of being understood. Childhood is a lonely land, even when a pleasant one, and its small denizens are forever on guard against the dragon "Ridicule." Evidently Felicia was convinced that here she could open her heart without fear, for, after a long sigh of relief she began, — speaking with unaccustomed vivacity:

"You was singing, — up an' down-like, and I was that kid in a little boat, movin' up an' down, too, jes' so."

She gave the motion with her hand above the counterpane.

"Yes, dear, I am listening. I have felt just that way in a dream myself."

"You know I aint ever been in a real boat," confessed Felicia. "But I've seed a mite o' picters uv boats an' water in the papers, and when I thought I

wuz in yo' singin'-boat, it seemed jes' as nachal (natural) as de old mill floor."

"And did you like being in the boat?" smiled Maris.

"You bet yo' socks I did!" cried the child. "I liked the rockin', an' the way the breeze blowed. Hit smelt jes' like yo' handkerchief that first night. They was a lot o' shinin' water way out in front, an' I kept on sayin' to de boat 'go on, — go on, — go on, — You kaint go too far fer mel'."

"And all the time you were sailing farther and farther away from shore," said Maris, to encourage the narrative.

"Yas'm," said Felicia dreamily, and then paused. She withdrew her eyes from the shimmering distances of vision to search again the beloved face so near. "I didn't mind leavin' the land," she said at length, putting out her hand again that Maris might clasp it, "but you was standin' back there awaitin', an' you didn't have no boat."

"And I was calling out to you not to go so far away, now wasn't I?" asked Maris, smiling a little tremulously.

"Nome, you wasn't, — not exactly," said Felicia, with an air of reluctance at contradicting the oracle. "That was one of the funny things. You didn't make no noise at all, an' you didn't wave yo' hand, but I knew you was cryin' out to me inside yo'se'f, an' that was why I know'd I mus' come back."

"Yes, — yes," said the mother hurriedly. "You must always come back, just as you did that terrible night from the train. You must never let people keep you away from me, darling. Promise, — promise, that you will always find the way back."

"I promise, — cross my gizzard, I do," said the child soothingly. "Don't you fret yo'se'f a minute 'bout that. I'll allays find my way to you."

"Oh, Lisshy, Lisshy!" the woman burst out in an agony, and then bit her lips till they bled, to keep back the torrent of words that would have betrayed their true relationship. The doctor had warned her against exciting the child by a premature disclosure. She, herself, was not ready for the revelation, and yet at moments, the wish to claim Felicia as her very own was like a convulsion of desire. She buried her face now on the pillow just beside Felicia, swallowing hard and clenching her hands to keep back the threatened hysteria. The child continued to pat and soothe her with her uninjured hand, murmuring words of love and encouragement, so that neither of them heard or saw the two visitors who had come to the opened door, and now stood, in silence, watching the pathetic scene.

Felicia caught sight of them first. "Lady's bin' singin' a lot, an' she is plum wore out," she explained, with dignity.

Maris lifted her head.

"Maris, dear," said Ruth. "Harvey has a message for you."

Maris got to her feet and faced them with frightened eyes. Her first thought was of a threat from Jane and Winch.

"It is no bad news, I assure you, Mrs. Alden," said Page quickly. "But perhaps it is just as well for me to tell you in the next room."

He made a motion of the head toward Felicia, and at the same instant Ruth said: "I'll stop here with our little patient."

Maris followed the young doctor in silence. She knew well enough that his precaution was against her possible lack of self-control, and not out of necessity for Lisshy's welfare.

"It is from your husband," said Harvey at once,

when they had reached the outer corridor. "A great mental change has taken place in him, ever since, in fact, a visit from the woman Jane Winch."

"Yes, — yes," was all Maris could say, but her clasped hands and imploring eyes urged him to haste.

"All along, as you know, he has refused to see you, — but now —"

"But now?" her ashen lips repeated.

"He sends you, by me, a formal request to grant him an interview here in the library, at six o'clock."

"Six o'clock," Maris repeated mechanically. "Six of this very day?"

"Yes, and that," said Harvey briskly, taking out his watch, "makes it just two hours off."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CONFLICT

HE is coming. He will be here at six! Oh, why do the dull hours drag across the day so heavily? Oh, why do the hours flash by before the beating of my heart can know, again, the rhythm of control? At six, — at six o'clock, and already five is here!

The evening falls grayly. One cannot see where the sun is to sink, or whether there be a sun at all. The houses march by in the dusk like spectral mammoths through a dream; the low hills to the west stretch out into a leaden moor. Only the gaunt hill to the east bares redly its long bright wounds.

Over the crest and down along the further hill-slope, the pigmy house-blocks cluster, and here and there a flickering light declares a human habitant. In one of the huts there is a man, a leprous creature crawling back to life, and tangled in some hideous, unfathomed way with the very tissues of nobler existences. Scarcely a mile from him, as the crow flies, his child is lying in a rich man's bed. Whose child did you say it was? Yes, that is right, the leper's; surely it is not mine, — not Maris Alden's. Away with sickness, drunkenness, beggary, — all the unlovely refuse of misfortune! There is but one thing in the world for Maris Alden, and that is her husband's love.

It is of his own will he is coming back. He urged

upon me this interview. Surely it cannot be for further cruelty. I will entice him. I will play upon his heart; and together we will flee from this place of horrors, he and I!

The night comes on fast. From the upper window one can see how the blood on Red Horse Hill has dried to a black night-crust. The veins of the day are clogged with it. In the gray distance a child's voice cries "Lady! Lady!" Whose alien, whining child is it who calls me "Lady?"

"Maris, Maris, don't wrench yourself away from us. You must listen quietly. Maris! Shut your wild eyes while I am speaking. It is Ruth, your sister Ruth, that is here to help you. Harvey, — Oh, Harvey, look! Has it already gone too far?"

"Ruth, I don't know any one called 'Ruth,'" said Maris, frightened, half-complaining, her hands held palm outward to keep her companions off. "I am Maris, Maris Alden. My husband will soon be here to take me away. I must go to my room now and put on a pretty gown. This has become so black. I thought it white when I first put it on. Now, let me see." She stopped short, her brows taking on a small, perplexed frown, her curved forefinger pressed hard against her lips in a way she had when thinking. "I believe that new red one would be best. He liked to see me in bright colors. When I first put the red one on he called me an oriental poppy which the wind had snapped, for him, from its too brittle stem." She let the hand drop from her lips and stared on, smiling, into fantastic images of a distraught intelligence.

Ruth's face grew white with agony. "Harvey, can you not stop it? Is there nothing we can do?"

she moaned. "Oh, to have it all end in such a nightmare tragedy as this?"

The young physician was deaf to her. He had thought, for the moment, but for Maris. He had been watching her with eyes that seemed to Ruth those of a vivisector enjoying the throes of a helpless victim. Once the girl heard him mutter: "This is the sort of thing I expected."

At last his fixed scrutiny began to attract the wavering regard of Maris. She glanced at him, let her look flutter to a little distance, came back, almost furtively, to his hard, bright eyes, tried again to withdraw her own, and failed, then by shivering degrees became passive to his will.

Her vacant smile paled into fear. The nervous twitching of her fingers stopped. Suddenly, with a spasmodic movement, she was on her feet, trying to push past him, to escape the terrible magnet of his gaze. But Harvey seized her, and, to Ruth's horror, began to shake the frail figure as low-born women sometimes shake a disobedient child. Then he thrust her down and backward into the chair from which she had leaped. After one stifled scream, Maris made no resistance. Her eyelids fell, her head bent forward, and she lay in her place as motionless as a broken marionette.

"Harvey, Harvey, what is this that you have done!"

"Hush, Ruth, — the child in the next room must not be aroused. If she begins to weep aloud there is no hope at all for Maris. Go, bring me brandy, and the case that holds my hypodermics."

"You would not stupefy her, — make her insensible, when Dwight is coming —" Ruth ventured, in a shaking voice.

"Do as I tell you," said the doctor shortly, and

Ruth hurried off, her cheeks tingling with the rebuff, her heart triumphant that her lover was this man.

Quickly as she returned, Maris' eyes were already opened, and Harvey, kneeling beside her with one cold hand clasped strongly in both of his, was talking in a low, distinct voice.

Ruth, with her small freight, came up behind him and stood watching. Maris had, apparently, not seen her. The dark eyes were fixed with a shrinking, half-incredulous look upon the face of Page, and Ruth drew a great sigh of thankfulness to see that the wildness was already gone. Harvey was explaining, quite scientifically, how she had fainted, and how it had been necessary for him to break the straining thread of thought by what might seem great rudeness. He told her that the greatest test of all was now before her, — the coming interview with Mr. Alden, and that it was because of this momentous event, that he, Harvey, had dared extreme measures.

She submitted wordlessly to the hypodermic, and drank what was given her of the choking brandy. Then she leaned back again, and, for a moment, covered her face with her two hands.

Harvey and the girl beside him turned away, and to each other. They moved, by common instinct, across the room from the stricken figure in the chair, and when they were quite apart, Harvey held out his arms, and Ruth came to them, whispering: "I never knew how much I really cared for you before!"

So all remained in silence until Maris was heard to stir. She sat upright and looked toward her friends. "What is the time now?" she asked.

"Half after five," said Page.

"Only thirty minutes more, dear," cried Ruth, hurrying up to her. "And you will spend that in the room with me and Felicia, won't you?"

The other glanced down at her plain dress. "You do not need to change," said Ruth, answering the look.

"No," said Maris slowly, as she rose, "this black one is the best that I could wear."

Felicia had fallen asleep. A few moments later Harvey took his departure, and the two women sat alone in the deepening gloom.

"Don't let us light any of the lights yet," pleaded Maris. A little after, she asked in a low voice: "Did I seem, — did I act very queerly, while I was — ill?"

"Yes, dear. For a little while it seemed as if you must break down altogether. I couldn't have wondered much if you had. But you are clear and brave now. You feel no sense of strangeness. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Maris. "I was never more absolutely possessed of what faculties I own. But then, you know," she added, with a pathetic flicker of a smile, "I never prided myself on having many faculties."

Again silence fell. Because there was but one thought possible to each, no thought could be spoken. Only, when the hour was nearly reached, Maris said: "When we hear him coming, won't you go down and let him in, yourself, Ruth? I have told the servants to keep out of the main house until I ring for them."

When Maris entered the library there was but one dim light alive. Dwight stood immediately behind the faint radiance so that his face and shoulders were in comparative darkness.

Maris closed the door softly and stood with her back to it, facing Dwight. He did not speak at once,

and, as she stood waiting, the thought came over Maris quite as an impersonal interest, how remarkable it was that, in her brief ownership of this small room, three interviews should have taken place in it, each with a different companion, and all of such tremendous significance. This momentary withdrawal of personality, so to speak, this gray pause in which she was enabled to perceive, in perspective, her own desperate position, and the relation borne to it by her silent visitor, gave her an advantage of which she was not conscious, and of which she remained unconscious even after Dwight's opening remark: "I could not discuss this affair yesterday, Maris, when you came to me. I was still in partial ignorance —" He broke off, uncertain how to proceed.

Maris' eyes had lifted softly and now went searching for his face. "It was my fault for forcing myself upon you," she answered, in a voice to which her restored motherhood had added a deeper note of tenderness. "I —"

He interrupted by an imperious gesture, and, at the same instant stepped around by the end of the table nearest her. "Don't say that. I did not mean for you to take it that way. You are not, now, on the defensive, Maris." Again he paused and, to his amazement, was again at a loss how best to continue. This was not at all as he could have foreseen. It is true that he had made no intellectual pre-arrangement for his part in the coming interview. That would have seemed quite laughably superfluous. Maris and the logical development of thought had as little in common as a butterfly and a text book on botany. He had never dreamed of hesitating for a word with Maris. He had expected, in this hour of reconciliation, merely to condone, forgive and

reestablish. He had conceived of no other role for Maris than that of grateful penitent. Now he was puzzled and annoyed by the intangible veil that drooped between them, holding him back, and giving her an air of sensitive remoteness.

He drew himself together, and took a second resolute step forward to fix his eyes more firmly upon his wife.

She had not moved from her place against the door. In her straight black gown she seemed incredibly slight and child-like. Her hair, in this dim room, was part of the general blackness, and out of it her small upturned face gleamed like a tropic night-flower. He was conscious of something like a strange perfume, and, for an instant, the world began to waver and to reel with it.

"I fear you have been ill. You are dreadfully pale," he said. Still he had not spoken as he wished.

"Oh," replied Maris, with a gesture that showed how little importance she attached to it, "I believe I have been ill, but it is past. Please do not think of me as ill."

Flung thus upon his reserves he cried out: "Maris, I have come to tell you that we need not part. Things shall be with us as they were before this infernal nightmare came."

"We — need — not — part?" The words were echoed softly, incredulously, and as if at a great distance. Dwight saw that he must speak plainly. "I had an interview with Winch's wife last night at the hotel. She brought with her a paper that Winch tried to bribe you with. You knew he had a paper?"

"Yes, I supposed he meant me to know he had a paper."

"Of course he did not explain it fully. He did

not wish to give away his information until he was sure you could be bribed. I can just fancy how he terrified you with hints and threats, poor little woman." His voice shook a little, then dropped to a note of protecting tenderness.

"No," said Maris quickly, with a little gasp, "he did not frighten me."

"Yet you refused his propositions."

"I did not refuse because I was afraid."

"What were your real motives, Maris?"

"Shame for myself, and love for you," said Maris in a low voice.

Dwight gave a start toward her, but as quickly she had thrown out a shielding hand. "No, no. Why is it that you said we need not part?"

"Because the paper you failed to buy, not knowing its true value, I purchased outright, together with a pledge of secrecy, from the woman. It is safe here," he struck himself on the chest, and Maris winced as if the blow had been given to her. "I have examined it word by word, — a noxious task enough, you may be sure, — but it is legal. You have been freed from him for years, Maris. That was the thought that nearly drove me mad at first, — what, if he were alive, had been our relations. Well, that is all past now, thank heaven!" He threw his arms wide with a gesture of relief. "We can put the whole thing behind us, and begin again. The woman will keep silence, she and the man, too. I have paid enough for that."

"Then she, that servant woman, succeeded in bribing you?" said Maris, partly as a question, partly in the voice of one trying to fix a doubtful fact.

The other flushed. "That is not the word to use for the transaction, Maris. The parts that you and I have borne in this affair are very different."

"Yes, I did not think of that," murmured Maris, her eyes again lowered in shame. And then, as he stood before her, still scowling slightly from her recent speech, she breathed one further word, — "Felicia."

Dwight straightened himself. This javelin, he knew, must come, and he received it like a hero. "I have put much thought upon this problem, you may be sure. You shall be permitted to keep the child. In time I may even consent for it to receive our name. For the present no hint had better be given of her real parentage."

"Not even to Felicia herself?"

Dwight bit his lip hard before he was able to answer quietly. "Would you think it quite fair to me that it should be made public? Think about it from that point of view a moment, Maris. Try to think seriously."

Again the little room brimmed up with silence. In it the dim lamp hung like a submerged and phosphorescent sphere. Dwight took a few restless turns, glancing from time to time at Maris who, with head drooped forward, arms down hung, and fingers tightly interlaced, was striving to obey him and think seriously.

When she spoke her voice held a sadness that had been absent from it until this moment. "I see what you mean, Dwight. You have the right to ask this of me. It was chiefly for silence that you were willing to buy the paper. I promise you never to speak the truth about Felicia to any one, — not even to herself, until you tell me that I may speak."

Dwight gave a little half smile of indulgence. "Well, that was not my chief reason; I'm glad, though, that you are able to see even a part of the affair in a practical light. Then, as I take it, every-

thing is understood." There was the hint of a question in his last sentence. He came nearer by a few inches, and paused, waiting to see if she would speak. She only drew in a long, long breath, and it seemed to him that her face grew, if possible, more wan and white.

"Maris, will you not come to me?" he cried, and now his arms were stretched out to her. "I am hungry for my wife!"

She did not lift her lids, but through them she could see the look of love and mastery he bent upon her, — the fierce, sweet, tender look at which she had so often flushed and trembled in the sheer ecstasy of response. She had begun to tremble now, but she did not move toward him. Rather would it seem that she shrank and cowered. "Is the man, Martin, then, not alive?" she asked.

"Yes, curse him; he is alive enough. I suppose he will live along on my money for the next ten years. But he need make no difference to us now."

"To you perhaps not, — not, perhaps to you. You are a man, and wise, and strong. You look at these things as the world looks. But with me, — with me, — his being alive makes every difference."

Dwight stood as if suddenly paralyzed. His arms fell limply to his sides. "Did you not understand me to tell you that you have been free of him for years, — legally free, — long before our marriage? You surely cannot be ridiculous enough to let the mere fact of a degenerate existence stand between a love like ours!"

She nodded slowly, more than once. Shadows thickened under her eyes, and about her trembling lips. She put out groping hands and then placed the palms back of her against the door, as if she needed strength. "That's just what I do mean,

Dwight. Because that other life is evil and degenerate, — because once I was close to it, — because, oh, most of all, — because I love you absolutely, I must never look upon your face again while Martin lives.”

Alden tried to laugh. “Now, have I got to begin over from the first, and coax and argue down this flimsy web of prejudice. Leave all the weighty thoughts to me, dear. I am your husband in the sight of God and man.”

“We’re going, Felicia and I, as soon as she can travel. Your sister Ruth is to help us. I believe that she will understand why I cannot stay with you, even though you demand it. Don’t try to overcome me. I will not change. I must go away from you, Dwight, — I must! — I must!” Her last words were a wail.

He tried to look upon her calmly, tried by sheer strength of will to break her down, but he might as well have tried to bend a shaft of mist. The first premonitory hint of defeat touched him with an icy finger. “So this is the love you’ve boasted of so often!” he cried, the more harshly that he might hide the hurt pain of his voice.

“I love you, Dwight,” she panted. “I have never loved you more utterly, — with more agony of power than at this moment. Do you suppose it is easy for me to turn away from heaven when you hold the gate open for me! But I cannot, — I will not soil your blameless life by companionship with a woman who once belonged to that foul, living creature!”

“If he were dead then!” Dwight burst out.

“I must not think of that, — but death is clean and merciful. Let me go now, Dwight, while my strength lasts.”

But things had gone too far for Dwight's imperious nature. He brushed aside, by a gesture, her whispered petition for release.

"That talk of soiling my blameless life is all idiocy, you know. I could laugh if I did not see that it meant so much to you. I've been no saint, or Galahad in my time, Maris, and I never pretended that I had. I want you now, Winch or no Winch, — and if you won't come to me, by God, I'll take you, anyhow!"

He towered above her, his eyes flashing with resolve. She crouched still closer to the oaken panel, her clasped hands making a spot not much larger than a rose upon her breast. Terror was in her upraised eyes, but also love, the famished love-hunger of a woman's passionate soul. With one bold move Dwight stooped to her, catching her up, and crushing her in his arms. "What is it to us now, what has been?" he cried out fiercely. "You are mine, Maris, my dear wife, and all the devils of hell shall not drag you away from me!"

She gave a little moan and let her head fall backward on his arm. He covered her face and small backward curved throat with kisses, — mad, frenzied, famished kisses, that had in them something of the triumph of a rescued joy. Not until after his first fury of passion was assuaged did he take note of Maris' unresponsiveness. He drew his lips away, and let her head slip downward on his arm that he might see her face. It was white and still. Not all his rage of love had brought a flush to it.

"Maris!" he cried. Then, on a higher note of terror, "Maris!" Her lips did not even tremble for a word.

"Maris, my wife. My darling. Can you not speak? This is Dwight, your husband!"

Still Maris did not answer, and the man, shaking

in all his great height with a fear that seemed to turn his bones to ashes, managed to cross the room with his burden and place it gently in the padded chair. Then he reeled out into the hallway, and cried out for help from Ruth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MARIS RETURNS TO ORBURY

THE little town of Orbury is one of many, set down, in a happy mood, among the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. The quiet folk of Orbury are not boastful, — it is only the insecure who boast. In their unworldly hearts the dwellers here are certain, — yes, utterly assured, — that over them the sky spreads just a little more intense a blue, and about them the hills lift greener slopes than in other parts of earth.

Cotton-mills have, as yet, passed Orbury by, and in all its fertile valleys not one stark factory chimney scars the sight.

Its houses, many of them ante-bellum mansions, still conserve the line of one long undulating street set at both edges with splendid oaks; and if, here and there, an intrusive "store," has pushed its glittering windows to the very pavement's edge the town accepts it as a necessary evil and is the more zealous to keep less worthy magazines, — grocers, butchers, livery-stables and feed-stores, — together with the dwellings of traders and the servant classes rigorously in the limbo of muddy lateral thoroughfares.

The one car-line in Orbury still runs horse-cars. To be more accurate, they are mule-cars, and the drivers of the ancient vehicles, themselves as old and gray, are speaking acquaintances with every passer by.

Incidentally they are the errand boys and special delivery system of the village.

In the neighborhood of the station, — (even Orbury apathy and pride failed to keep the railroad at a respectful distance), — the few office buildings of the community raise flat red brick walls, and present to the street front, modern windows with names, well known to Southern history, printed neatly in gold upon the crystal surfaces. To these offices, each morning at an hour known to all, the professional men and financiers of the town repair, those at a comparative distance patronizing the cars. Should such a citizen be a few moments late, the car stops at his door until he shall have had time to put on his overcoat, and to kiss his wife and children an unhasting good-by.

For years, old Mrs. Weldon's shopping has been done by means of the kindness of "Old Man Jones," — driver and conductor in one, of car number two, — there are but two in all, — that obliging personage hurling her order, verbally, into the opened doors of Sparker, Trout and Spain as he goes down toward the depot, and, on his return, taking the parcel, — large or small as the case may be, — from the hands, likely as not, of one of the members of the firm, who will ask, courteously, "And how does the old lady seem this fine morning?" or, "If that wool isn't the right shade, bring it back, old man, and we'll keep on trying until she is satisfied. It won't do to disappoint M'is Weldon!"

There is no electricity in Orbury, though the more progressive citizens threaten it. Kerosene lamps and wax tapers light the church, the court-house, and the colonial hallways, or glimmer feebly at the corners of the streets. More marvellous still, there are no telephones. To this innovation the good dames

of Orbury have turned, literally, a deaf ear. Where would be the charm of running across the street to tell Mrs. Kinney that one has just had a letter from New York telling of the engagement of a beloved niece, if one could go, as well, to a hideous small box fastened to the wall of one's chamber, and, shrieking into an unresponsive aperture, transmit the news on wire? Where were the cheer, then, of the kindling eye, — the friendly thrill at words of sweet congratulation, the gentle gossip of other love affairs, — other engagements, — perhaps one's own?

Quite out toward the end of the one car-line stands a square red brick mansion with white porch and "trimmings," that might have been taken up bodily from an English lawn and reset here among box hedges grown for its reception. Two lines of the dark, scented shrub stretch, unbroken, from the level of the verandah floor, to the old white, sagging gate that gives down upon two granite steps to the sidewalk. The long brick pathway to the door speaks eloquently, indeed, of hospitality, but it is a hospitality that holds reserves. Only an aristocrat should walk between box hedges. Beyond the box line, east and west, the garden lies. Once it was orderly, and the pride, alike of its owner, and the passer by, — and here it was that Maris had played and dreamed away her childhood. But even she could not remember when the beds were trim. It was her young mother who had been the friend of flowers, and after her death the husband had forbidden any but their child to wander in the paths where she had loved to walk.

After his death, twenty years later, and Maris' disappearance from the ken of Orbury, the place had changed hands twice, and each time the new owner had made a desultory attempt to clear away the tangle

and let the garden bloom again. But misfortune, like a permanent shadow, lay across the old home. It was now taken over by the Misses Timberlake, worthy ladies of true "before the War" lineage, whose own pretty cottage had literally fallen away above their heads. Finding themselves compelled to move, and having been offered, at a rate ludicrously small, the old Brue house, they decided upon a revolutionary step, and let it become known that they were willing to take in a few genteel, paying guests.

The uprooting and reestablishing of the Misses Timberlake took place early in March, during the same week in fact, that far off, in modern Sidon, Ruth Alden was descending upon her brother and his wife.

The two maiden ladies, stiffened by years of petty habit, still drooped in the shadows of the great Brue home. They had not had the heart, as yet, to explore each corner of the house, much less of the wide overgrown garden. No "paying" guest, genteel or otherwise had lifted the great brass knocker of the door, and the Misses Timberlake were gradually sinking into gentle despair when they, together with the rest of "old" Orbury, were electrified by the news of Dr. Singleterry's death, and his expressed desire to be interred in Orbury. As if this fact alone were not enough to keep Orbury nerves tingling for a year, the letter, written very properly to the present incumbent of Dr. Singleterry's old church, the Reverend Joseph Carr, was signed, in unmistakable chirography, "Maris Brue Alden."

Next day a second letter came addressed, this time, to Mrs. Carr. In it the writer said that she had adopted and was now nursing back to health a child who had been injured in her husband's mill, and that,

within a few weeks, she wished to bring the little girl to Orbury. Mrs. Carr's good offices were invoked to find a suitable lodging place for them.

The funeral of Dr. Singleterry and his burial in the ivy-clad church were solemnly accomplished. The Reverend Mr. Carr sent a detailed account of it to the vestry of St. John's in Sidon, and good Mrs. Carr an even longer one to Maris. In closing it she said, "The old Brue home which I have been told was yours in childhood, has been recently taken over by the Misses Timberlake, worthy, Christian women who are in sadly straitened circumstances. If you have no feeling against residing in your old home which it is only right to tell you is terribly in need of repair it will be a great pleasure to the Misses Timberlake to have you as well as of the most substantial assistance to them."

Mrs. Carr was given to underscoring adverbs, and those abstract nouns which might be thought to imply moral obligation. In the present missive the word "assistance" received two horizontal marks beneath.

Days passed, and no answer came from Maris. The Reverend Mr. Carr had been duly thanked and praised by Dr. Singleterry's late parish. And now his worthy spouse, slowly bridling at the implication of neglect wrote again to Maris, this time briefly, and with what she conceived to be offended dignity. An answer came from Ruth.

"DEAR MRS. CARR:— My sister, Maris Alden, is quite seriously ill. Also the little girl of whom she wrote is not doing so well as we could wish. It will certainly be some weeks before either of them is strong enough to travel.

"In the meantime I have no hesitation in enga-

ging, for my sister's use, two rooms with southern exposure in the old Brue mansion. I enclose herewith my personal check for fifty dollars to be used by the Misses Timberlake in getting the apartment ready.

"Please say nothing to my sister of this money. It is a small gift to her and to the little girl whom I, also, have come to love.

"Very truly yours,
"RUTH ALDEN."

This letter, read and re-read by various old friends of Maris' family, added sentiment to the prevailing interest. Orbury literally steeped itself in sympathy. Maris' illness was of course due to sorrow at old Dr. Singleterry's death, and to the overpowering thought that at last she was to return to her deserted birth-place. Each one recalled, though at first she did not speak it, the tragedy that had led to Maris' flight.

That first evening after Ruth's letter more than one old lady needed to take sassafras tea before retiring, and, in the morning, when she awoke to the zest of another stirring day, the twitter of sparrows at the eaves sounded like the summoning roll of snare-drums.

Little else was discussed in drawing rooms and over tea tables. Among the ladies, — and the number fortunately included the Misses Timberlake, — were several who recalled the bedchamber where Maris, as a child, had slept. It was a somewhat small wing room opening directly from the one where her father had taken refuge from too poignant memory, after the mother's death. Until then theirs had been the large front chamber overlooking the main street. All of the young girl's memories must have been associated with this wing room, and it happened that, with the loan of this or that article acquired by some

kindly Orburian purchaser "for a song" at the disastrous Brue auction, the furnishings could be restored almost intact. That one should refuse to lend for such a purpose was beyond the reach of Orbury imagination.

On the other hand, and here were, indeed, delicate points for discussion, — after Maris' defiant marriage to young Martin, and Daniel Brue's prompt forgiveness of the thing he had pre-threatened never to forgive, the young couple had been given the use of the closed front chamber. In it the baby, Felicia, had been born, and here for a few months at least it might be supposed that the girl-wife had known something resembling happiness. Whether now to allot to Mrs. Alden this "chief guest-chamber," (for so the new owners had already termed it), or to place her in the smaller room among the loved environments of childhood, — these were the alternatives that consumed more time and tea than all other questions put together.

Finally a sort of compromise was reached. Both chambers were to be reserved for Maris' use, but just at first she should be conducted to the smaller one only.

In such ways did the old dames conspire for Maris' benefit.

Being but human, if altogether kind, it was inevitable that they should sometimes whisper, behind delicate, upraised hands, of "that low fellow, Martin," and wonder greatly just how it was that Maris had finally traced him, and learned of his death. It was well known, of course, to all of them that she had sacrificed what little her father had left her that she might pursue the guilty pair, and reclaim Felicia.

The fact of her silence had hitherto been proof to them of her failure. Now that she had reappeared as

the wife of another man, it was equally patent that James Martin was no more. The adoption of a cotton mill waif bespoke a more poignant loss, that of the baby girl. This beautiful charity, — so said the gentle gossips, — was doubtless in memory of Felicia. More than one pair of kindly, faded eyes brimmed at the thought of Maris' return under conditions so strangely altered.

During Maris' brief, desperate illness consequent upon the interview which Dwight had forced, the unhappy man spent hours of such torture as his late fear of personal disgrace had never brought. He made no pretense of interest in the mill. Buck McGhee was gone, and this was no time to search out a successor. Dwight finally solved the difficulty by shutting down the mill, cancelling immediate orders, and keeping on the employees by paying them half wages.

He still retained his apartment at Putnam's and slept there, knowing it was what Maris would have wished; but most of his waking time was spent in miserable wandering about the rooms and hall ways of the Brattle house. He was not allowed to enter his wife's sick chamber; and Harvey had let him know, with brutal frankness, that to his own selfish insistence was due Maris' present state of danger.

It had proved impossible to keep all knowledge of the mother's illness from Felicia, and the continued fretting, as Ruth had written to Mrs. Carr, brought something in the nature of a relapse to the small patient.

Mercifully for Dwight and Felicia too, the crisis came early. When Harvey was able to say to his friend, — gripping him as men will by a friendly shoulder, "Brace up. She's going to pull through,"

Alden reeled as if in sudden intoxication, and then, sinking into a chair, covered his face, and broke into the long, dry terrible sobs that are the supreme tribute of strength to an overpowering emotion.

For two days longer he remained in Sidon, until he could be sure that Maris was recovering as swiftly as any doctor could have wished, and then, with the hearty sanction of the physician and of Ruth, went on to New York with the ostensible purpose of engaging a new mill-manager, but really to put himself beyond the temptation of seeing Maris.

As the invalid grew strong, his name was never spoken, and, taking her silence for a cue, the others also shunned it.

Felicia, by now, was on her feet. A memorable day for both befell when the child, wrapped about over her dainty night-dress with a kimono dressing gown splashed faintly with great pink poppies, a huge ribbon bow of the same shade perched like a tropic butterfly at one side of her shining head, came into Maris' room on Ruth's guiding arm.

At first the mother could only stare, bewildered. Then she drew her visitor down to kiss her, and held her off again, that she might see more clearly. The child, self-conscious, shy, ecstatic with the knowledge of her own prettiness and the pleasure it was giving "Lady," could only droop her lids, and stand there, smiling.

Maris' eyes filled, her lips seemed to move, and Ruth bent far over to hear the whispered words, "My baby, — and so pretty, — so pretty! Even the mill has not been able to blight her sweetness."

With her established convalescence Maris' desire to get away to Orbury became an obsession. Apart from the humiliating fact that she was keeping Dwight from his home, she wished to put a greater

distance between Felicia and the degraded pair that she still thought of as her parents.

Through Ruth's intelligent investigations she learned that they had left the mill village and rented a neat cottage in the residence part of Sidon. Here, on a very different variety of "front gallery" Jim Winch, attired in loud "store clothes" and seated in a large red rocking chair every motion of which squeaked with newness, passed most of his waking hours. His recovery had been discouragingly swift and was, apparently, permanent. Yet it suited his purpose to be considered still an invalid. As such he became a sort of oracle, a social centre for other shirks and loafers, and was wont to speak at times, movingly, of physical suffering heroically endured, and of the more intimate grief known to a father who has been bereft of his own child and forced into acquiescence by the greed of a tyrannical wife. At first he had been inclined to fury against Jane for her visit to Alden and the sale of the paper, but the blunt edges of his sentiment, still further dulled by the bodily comforts which Jane heaped about him, soon ceased to offer resistance.

To the woman, this was a period of comparative happiness. Winch had not yet showed any desire to return to drinking, her own bondage to toil was at an end, and, in the pleasures of a real home, of daily purchases, and the furnishing of their cottage, the poor stunted soul blossomed like a desert after rain.

Harvey had about decided to cast in his fortunes with the south, giving special attention to the spread of tubercular diseases among mill people. No date was set for his marriage with Ruth. When he pleaded the girl would not listen. "We are too selfishly happy as it is," she would say. "How can we think

of marriage when poor Dwight and Maris are so miserable?"

To any child the first trip on a train is an event. To the small Felicia it loomed up like an approaching miracle. She could remember being dragged about in baggage cars, but to be privileged to enter that glittering, great wonder known as a "Palace Car," to look out of its crystal windows as she had seen other little girls look, — to be, yes, actually to be one of those other little girls, the kind that wear big ribbon bows and have short white dresses of embroidery under bright travelling coats, — this thought was so incredible that Felicia would sometimes have to catch her breath in sharply, and hold her eyelids close until the tremor passed. Above all, to be taking such a trip with "Lady," — just she alone with "Lady," that gentlest, sweetest, most heavenly of beings whose dark eyes seemed always trying to speak a love that no mere words could utter, this was the climax of her childish happiness.

Maris, until the very instant of starting, had been nervously apprehensive of some hostile move from Jane. In vain Harvey and Ruth assured her that for self-interest alone the woman would be still. She was at the station to see them off, pathetically gaunt and yellow in her new, cheap finery. She made no attempt to approach them, but stood in the background, watching, her arms folded, an inscrutable smile wrinkling the corners of her faded eyes. "Thank heaven!" Maris involuntarily exclaimed, as the train, with accelerating motion, swept into the suburbs. Her last vision of Sidon was the curving crest of Red Horse Hill, the scarred sides mounting to a ridge of early summer green.

The child, whose usual mood was one of silence,

attempted to say little of the marvels flying past, only now and again Maris would feel the slight form shiver, or the finger of her "good" hand twitch convulsively, at a new impression. Maris did not encourage conversation. Felicia's words and voice, particularly in excitement, had the tang of the "poor white trash." The other passengers must surely have wondered at hearing these pariah accents from a child so perfectly attired, and of such a patrician type of beauty.

Toward the late afternoon both felt fatigue. Maris called for a pillow and made Felicia lie on the seat opposite. Soon the little face was calm in slumber. Maris sat on, staring out into the now deepening night. In a few more hours she would be again in Orbury, she and Felicia. How would things seem to her? What old, remembered faces would there be? She tried to picture them, but each had in it some suggestion from which she shrank. Well, no need, after all, for vague speculation; in another hour she would be among realities.

Resolutely she turned her thoughts away only to find them creeping back to her, half furtively, one by one. The porter came through the train with small step-ladder and taper, lighting all lamps. The radiance given was scarcely clear enough for reading, yet, slanting against the window glass it blotted out the misty landscape. She leaned back, closed her eyes, and tried to sleep; but, an instant afterward, smiled to herself that she could have thought sleep possible.

She sat upright again the better to fight back intruding visions. Felicia stirred restlessly. The train began to slacken speed. Maris dragged out her watch. No, this could not be Orbury. They were still within thirty minutes of the scheduled time.

The train stopped, but even at the instant of pause the engine tooted impatiently as if to say it had drawn up before this tiny out-post under protest. Maris pressed her face close against the pane and read the station's name, "Nevota." She had known it well, and often in childhood had been here with her father. Under the hard blue light of the one electric lamp she saw an old negro man that she had known. The old man did not see her. Maris could not have told his name, but the sight of him let in, as through a broken door, a troop of memory demons. She tried no longer to control them, but gave herself up as prey. There was a certain relief in her abandonment.

At Orbury quite a delegation awaited them. Familiar names were stated, but in most instances Maris could not recall them quickly. She pleaded for herself and for Felicia their recent illness and the fatiguing journey of the day, and so was able to make prompt escape. Even the driver of the ancient cab had known her, and spoke to her now as "Miss Maris," saying that he "sholy used to love her paw," who was as "good a white man as ever trod de path!"

The Misses Timberlake were at the door of the old Brue house to meet her. They were both excited and embarrassed and strove to hide these facts by an incessant output of short, broken sentences, "My poor dears—" "And the little girl—" "Welcome back, dear Maris!" "It must seem strange to you—" and many others, as if a flock of gray moths of speech were suddenly released.

A fire burned in the open hearth. It had been lighted three hours earlier, and, in the ensuing agitation, no one had thought of replenishing it. Maris ran to the fire, knelt, and with gloved hands pushed two log-ends into the central heat. The bright flame answered like a cheery "Halloa!" For some

strange reason she was embarrassed at Felicia's presence. She dreaded to turn about and see the child's small face. The fire had become, for the instant, her one friend in a hostile world.

Almost without looking she had recognized the furniture as the same that her childhood and her young womanhood had known. It strode toward her into the new light, dread forms from a previous existence. The childhood that it had sheltered was the childhood of a dead woman. Maris Alden had no right to it. The sense of isolation grew to a nightmare chill. She shivered violently, crouching down close to the flame.

"Lady," came Felicia's plaintive voice. "Can't we git into this purty bed soon? I'm orful tired."

She tended the child mechanically, soothing her with vague gentle words, the meanings of which she could not, afterward, have recalled.

When the small traveller was, at last, in bed, and her low, regular breathing told of sleep, the fire had again sunken to a mere glow of coals.

Maris turned from the bed, faced the open fire-place, and, more by instinct than intelligent design, moved toward a spot to the left of the square, protruding chimney, where, in the old days used to stand a lidless cedar-chest, hard bound in brass, and kept always filled with logs of hickory or of oak.

Mechanically she stooped, and put out her hand, only to draw back with a feeling of rebuff. No box was there.

She lighted a candle and made a more systematic search. There was no chest anywhere, nor, as far as Maris could see, any provision for a store of wood. She registered a vow to purchase, next day, a chest as much like the old one as Orbury could furnish her.

By this the room was growing cold. She lighted a

second candle, went to the window to pull down the shade, and, finding there was none, retired behind the chimney corner, and began to undress.

Then she blew out the candles and crept into the bed beside Felicia. Until the gray of morning she lay stark awake, staring, — staring upward.

So, after eight years of memorable wandering, did Maris spend a night in Orbury.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TWO CALLERS

THE good folk of Orbury having, with more than friendly courtesy, accepted and established Maris, now withdrew and waited for their guest to make the first tentative move. Had she been poor and friendless they would have flocked to her with graceful loans and offers of assistance so delicately devised that the favor of acceptance would have seemed that of the giver. But, since she had become the wealthy Mrs. Dwight Alden of New York, it behooved the true Orburian to temporize.

Thus, for the first week and more, Maris remained almost a stranger in the town of her birth. The sense of bewilderment which had enwrapped her upon arrival still clung tenaciously. In one point only was there complete reversal of her initial mood. Orbury grew to be the unreality, and Felicia the one tangible fact in an existence at once abnormal and insecure. She clung to the child as to a talisman, and, gradually, through her innocent companionship, began to exorcise the spectre of another childhood, — her own, — from which she shrank with an unreasoning fear. She would have liked to forget, if only for a time, all that had preceded her return to Orbury, and to engross herself in the morning lessons now given to Felicia and the hints as to language and deportment still constantly needed.

Felicia's response to all improvement was instantaneous. In conduct she seldom forgot a point that Maris had once made clear, but in her speech, its grammatical errors and the drawling hint of "po' white trash," she and Maris found a more subtle enemy. Yet even in this the change for the better was pronounced. Apart from the slight nasal intonation which, at last, was beginning to disappear, the quality of the child's voice was like her mother's, soft, vibrating, and of a contralto sweetness heard now and again among well-born women of the South.

In this shy opening of petals so nearly blighted, Maris could have found partial respite even from tormenting images of the man she loved, but Felicia, with the perversity of childhood, delighted in tales of her mother's early life, and was never weary of asking questions.

"Did you walk right here, — right where we're walkin', Lady, when you was a little girl?" she would ask, as they paced together the moss-spread pathways. Or, at night: "Sometimes I can't hardly sleep for thinkin' how funny it is you was born in this very house, an' that you an' me has come here together."

"Yes, darling," Maris answered patiently, "it does seem very strange, but you must try not to say 'you an' me has come.' It is 'you and I have come.'"

"Yes'm," said Felicia meekly, while Maris hastened to change the topic of conversation. This did not serve her, for in the midst of it Felicia burst forth, impulsively: "I do wish, Lady, that I knowed, knewed, I mean, — that I knewed where I was borned at!"

Mrs. Joseph Carr called early. It was her duty, and the call was typical of a virtuous duty call.

No accessory was lacking, the bland, expressionless face, black gloved hands folded decorously in a swart silken lap, conversation incessant, innocuous, kindly, and, at parting, the perfunctory: "Well, my dear, I trust you will have a pleasant, if a quiet visit with us."

Mrs. Carr was one of those estimable women who wear their goodness like an ancestral brooch. No one could avoid it or mistake its import. Its very presence sounded a challenge to the unanointed and had been known to arouse antagonism. Mrs. Carr prayed loudly at each service, "Lead us not into temptation," an unnecessary personal precaution, for it would be difficult to imagine a temptation, however inexperienced, that would not flee before the good soul's ponderous approach. Her stentorian and vibrating responses as her husband read aloud the ten commandments were spoken of, by the ungodly, as laughable.

Upon the occasion of this parochial call, as she would have termed it, Mrs. Carr, having remained no longer and no shorter a time than was exactly proper, rose to take her departure. Maris, after the Southern fashion, insisted upon going out to the porch with her and was standing there exchanging the last perfunctory nothings when Felicia, who had been playing alone in the garden, saw them and ran up to throw an adoring arm about her mother.

Mrs. Carr glanced down, her face still plastered with its vapid smile, when all at once she started, the smile cracked and fell, and it was with difficulty the good soul restrained a cry of surprise. The resemblance between the small upturned face and that of Maris was astonishing, to say the least. Maris flushed and pressed the child closer. In a

moment the visitor had recovered her usually impregnable self-confidence. She leaned to touch the little cheek with a thick, gloved forefinger, and to give permission "some of these nice days," to have Felicia call at the rectory and play with "my little girl."

Maris and Felicia stood together in silence, watching the broad, amiable back slowly recede between the lines of box. Somehow, with all its sheen of silk, it was not a back for box hedges. The fully gathered skirt sagged a little under the black spangled belt, and the silken collar, pinned at the nape of a round, red neck, had failed to join exactly.

When she reached the gate and, after a last munificent wave of the hand, stepped down to the level of the pavement, Maris bent to kiss the child's cheek just where the righteous forefinger had touched it and said: "Run up-stairs for our two hats, chicken. There is a friend I want to visit."

Felicia went like a small whirlwind. She did not pause to question. To be with "Lady" was always happiness enough; to go forth with her to whatever destination little short of rapture.

Arm in arm they passed out into the stately street where, turning sharply to the left and walking toward "town," they soon came to an ivy-grown church set in the midst of a wide, green churchyard. An iron fence ran about three sides of the enclosure. At the rear stretched a high brick wall, and, just behind it, a little to the left, the small paned windows and high gables of "The Rectory." To Maris' girlhood this house had always been merely, "Dr. Singleterry's house." She could not then have realized the continued existence of the place, or of the old church either, apart from that benign and hospitable spirit. She thought now, sadly, of the vanished

row of artichokes once silvering the farther shadows of the old church wall (Mrs. Carr had boasted of a line of cannas that now flourished), and of the fragrant whirl of pinks once rioting beneath the study windows.

Of these things she said nothing to Felicia, but continued to lead her, in silence, toward the one new-made mound of earth. The grass ran scantily upon it. Maris stood gazing down. After a while she said: "This is the friend I spoke of. Under this place is all that God has left to us of the dear minister you knew in Sidon, Dr. Singleterry."

Felicia attempted no reply, but, since she was usually slow in speaking, Maris failed to notice the fact. A little later she added: "We must plant some clove-pinks here, darling, you and I. And, maybe, if things go well with us, we can some day set a white stone to his memory."

A small sob answered her. Turning swiftly Maris saw that the child's face was twitching, her small brows were drawn together in a spasm of repression, and that it was with difficulty she held back an hysterical attack of tears.

"Why, my darling baby!" cried Maris, kneeling that she might hold the shaking little figure close, "I did not know that it would trouble you so much. I thought you would like to come to this peaceful green spot with me."

"Nome, — I don't!" sobbed Felicia, hiding her face against Maris' neck. "I don't like buryin' grounds and dead folks. They make me skeered. Them little buryin' grounds of children down in Sidon used to git into my head at night, so's I could not sleep. I thought I would have to be planted in one o' them some day, an' every time I felt sick and dizzy I used to dream of them. Oh, they was

terrible! No grass or trees, or nothin' purty, jes' humps of red clay. Sometimes they put a little wooden plank wid your name on it, but that got rotten and fell down."

Maris shuddered, and clasped the child with such convulsive tenderness that she cried out with the pain. "Come, let us go away," said Maris, and they hurried out without a backward look.

The strong physical likeness between Mrs. Alden and her protege had, of course, been noted by others than Mrs. Joseph Carr. The Misses Timberlake, for instance, had exchanged alert glances over the first breakfast table to which Maris and the child had come. And the name, "Felicia," was such an unusual one! This coincidence was too much for credulity, and the fact could only be explained by a re-naming of the rescued mill waif in memory of Maris' own lost child. Unless — unless — Well, there are some things at which even fireside speculation must hesitate.

Before many days the elder and more intrepid Miss Timberlake summoned up courage to ask whether their conjecture as to the re-naming of the child were not correct; to which Maris, with pain and humiliation in her heart, but also with a glow of something that resembled happiness because she bore this added sting for Dwight, answered "Yes."

Emboldened by her sister's bloodless victory, the younger Miss Timberlake, she of the low, round collars and the curls, hastened to inquire, in a shy, half-frightened way, whether it was Maris' intention permanently to adopt Felicia. The very timidity of the small, new onslaught was exasperating, and Maris replied, more curtly perhaps than she intended:

"I shall never give up the child, if that is what you mean."

The younger Miss Timberlake shrank like the leaf of a sun-dew, and, at the following meal, bore an air of pensive injury. Maris did not mistake the semi-hostile attitude, but she was powerless to alleviate it. The promise given to Dwight made it imperative that she should repel curiosity. For this the only weapon was reserve.

Mrs. Carr's report of her visit had not been altogether favorable. "No," she replied thoughtfully when questioned, "I can't say that she was exactly what you would call 'stuck-up.' She scarcely would have attempted airs with *me*! On the other hand —" here she paused to feed upon the eagerness of listening eyes — "I should not have called her gushing. Yes, that's it; she was polite but not gushing, — not free and open-hearted like, — well, — like ourselves who have not married rich Northern gentlemen. To be candid —" here came a second pregnant pause, "she gave me the impression of a person who was ill at ease. Now understand," she supplemented quickly, a warning forefinger upraised, "I don't say that she is ill at ease. You all know that I never say unkind things about others, and, in this case, I may be entirely in the wrong. I only say that this was my impression, and that I *may* be wrong." There was an indefinable, self-righteous inflection on the word "may," and, in response to it, one listener, old Mrs. Trout, croaked sepulchrely, in this way venting her belief that Mrs. Carr was not wrong in her impression. Mrs. Trout, whose first name was "Maria," had gained from the youthful and irreverent of Orbury the cognomen of "Black Maria." She was never out of mourning, though the cause of her black draperies remained obscure, and her

dissemination of scandal was proverbial. In a short time the word went broadcast that Maris was not particularly cordial to Orbury visitors, and that she acted as one who had unpleasant secrets to conceal. The Misses Timberlake were approached, and while the elder charitably attempted to deflect the tide of suspicion, the younger shook from her curls the last hope of popular dissent.

Maris, always sensitive to the moods of others, knew well how the haze of mistrust was deepening. Already she felt herself and Felicia as beings set apart. Soon the vague mystery would change, in the mind of Orbury, to positive dislike. She and the child were being gently, relentlessly isolated, and the only bond between themselves and their fellow townsmen and women would be the vulgar and detested one of money. The Misses Timberlake would not turn them out, of course. Maris' large monthly payments would bring the assurance of many years of comfort to the good ladies; besides, apart from the question of payment, there was no ground for open expulsion. It was all invisible, insidious, not to be combatted. Mrs. Carr would doubtless keep her promise of "having them both to tea," and the minister would make Christian visits at decorous intervals. People would speak kindly on the street, but the inner heart of Orbury would be closed to them. The old sense of helplessness bore down upon Maris. At times something like desperation seized her. She longed to rush out among the narrow, good, lovable women and cry aloud to them: "Don't turn your hearts from me. I need you, oh, so sorely. I am just Maris Brue, — not Mrs. Dwight Alden of New York. I long to tell you all of my sad life, to take up the past with you from the day I went forth in a madness of grief from Orbury.

I have done wrong, but I have suffered greatly. You would forgive me if I could let you know it all."

For a few weeks more the wretched strain continued. Felicia, free from subtleties, romped in the prim old garden and began to glow with a delicate pink such as one sees in a cyclamen bud; while, on the other hand Maris, it would seem, lost the vitality that the child was gaining. She went no more to the green churchyard, and made no effort to return the few visits paid her by old friends of the family.

Her life and Felicia's now centred in the garden. She had asked and obtained from the Misses Timberlake the somewhat grudging permission to attempt restoration of this once loved spot. The tangled rose trees and the age-black yews were trimmed. Moss-covered, crumbling bricks at border edges were replaced and the sunken walks filled in and graded. It became a sad satisfaction to the unhappy woman to reset, as far as possible, such plants as her earlier days had known. This was a difficult problem since modern florists know and care little about damask roses, and fragrant "ambrosia" bushes. In many cases Maris was ignorant of the very names of the plants she most desired to obtain. Had things been different between herself and the garden-loving folk of Orbury, she would have begged a "layer" here, a "cutting" there, until, in the sweet genealogy of village flowers she would have eventually renewed her garden with shrubs transmitted through the years and taken from the original Brue planting.

But all this was denied her. Money bought hired labor and had power to send down from the North great boxes packed with rare, growing plants, — for in this one respect was Maris extravagant, — but it could not command the friendly interest that

means so much to a worker in a beloved garden, nor arouse a feeling of personal pride in the result among the somewhat critical onlookers. There was curiosity, of course, regarding this new whim of the rich woman who had once been Maris Brue, but curiosity is an arid substitute for friendly interest.

It was, at last, old Mrs. Weldon who came forward as Maris' aid and champion. This old dame had been, for years, a local character. Born in a New England coast town, she had married, a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War, an easy going, gentle young Southern farmer. She had left her part of the world for his, determining to be not only his helpmate, but an ardent worker in the cause of abolition. This in itself, at such a time, was enough to insure social ostracism. At the close of the long, bitter struggle she was heard to say, publicly, that defeat was the best thing that could possibly happen to the South, and that now North Carolina, together with the rest of America, could at last enter upon a civilized existence.

Plain speaking is always a dangerous luxury, and Mrs. Weldon paid the full price. Her indignation at subsequent carpet-bagging atrocities did but little to allay the antagonism she had aroused. But neither she nor her husband allowed the hostile attitude to embitter life. The farm was still theirs to be worked upon and improved. The Weldons were the first in that section of the country to introduce new methods of farming and to employ negroes at daily wages.

For twenty years they not only made agriculture "pay," but had added steadily to their acreage of pasture-land, and had set new trees in orchards. It was known that the Weldons "prospered." The

couple were seldom seen in Orbury. Their farm was seven miles away, and near it was a small Methodist church to which they went each Sunday. Even here they seldom lingered among their neighbors for a chat. As old sectional bitternesses began to fade, more than one shy overture of friendship was made to them, but they seemed to care little for a change in their social status. Soon it was said of them that "Jake Weldon and that Yankee wife of his'n were so plum crazy about each other that they didn't keer 'bout seein' *no-body* else!"

This rumor, as it happened, was absolutely true. The Weldons bore no resentment against those who had slighted them, but they no longer needed companionship. The marriage had not brought children and the husband and wife, thrown so closely upon each other, had found complete fulfilment of all needs. Their tastes were identical and the long habit of love and of common interests held them together with indestructible bonds. Such people are not introspective, and Sarah Weldon had not realized, until her husband's sudden death at fifty, how absolutely she had merged her life in his.

In one week she was changed from a vigorous, erect woman into a stricken, white-haired invalid, whom it was sadness even to look upon. She was never heard to complain, but her health, once unsailable, began to give way at every point. Malady after malady visited her, and each exacted its full toll of strength. Her physicians declared that the most baffling symptom was her voiceless desire to die. Her nature was too sane to resort to self-destruction, but it is true that life seemed to her, for many years, a loathed obstruction holding her back from peace.

She sold the splendid farm for a fair profit, in-

vesting part of the proceeds, and with part buying a small cottage at the very end of the one street car line of Orbury. For years she had never crossed the limits of her own little garden. A terrible attack of muscular rheumatism had left her permanently lame. Passers-by could see her hobbling about this garden, pausing to loop back a wandering vine, or, sometimes, stooping painfully to examine the growth of some new plant.

But even the most desolating grief, if one live at all, must soften gradually under the healing touch of the recurrent seasons. Spring, Summer, Autumn, and the brief pause of Winter, — each calms us as with the stroke of a great, divine and gentle hand, and, as each one vanishes, the sorrowing heart whispers to itself: "Another season has somehow passed. I am still here. I have lived through this, and will live through others, if God wills it so." In this way it came about that 'Old M's' Weldon, as she was now generally called, began to take an interest in the infrequent visits of her neighbors, and, in time, to urge them to come oftener. She never became, in the usual sense, a gossip, and that ugly changeling, scandal, never found a nook in Mrs. Weldon's ear. Black Maria, otherwise Mrs. Trout, dared not air her unlovely freight in Mrs. Weldon's presence, though she found at times a precarious joy in whisking the draperies aside. Mrs. Weldon had been known to protest, impatiently: "What do I care whether or not Amanda Paget has turned her blue alpaca! Tell me whether she's keeping up that voice of hers, after her Grandpa stinted himself to give her a year's trainin' up to Baltimore."

To a deepening and always kindly insight into the human lives immediately about her, she added an

ever-growing appreciation of the bigness and wonder of the outer world, and was eager to read of the events that leave their marks on the centuries. She subscribed to various magazines, and what books she bought were worth buying. It was said that she knew something about everything, and, in truth, at the time of Maris' sojourn in Orbury, the old lady was as well informed concerning the Chinese Dynasty and its chances of succession, as to the progress of the measles among the Potts children down the road.

During the first weeks of Maris' stay, while conjectures flew about like a sprightly game of shuttlecock, Mrs. Weldon had been sparing both as to questions and comments, but it was noticed that her interest never flagged when Maris was the topic of conversation. At the height of the adverse criticism, Mrs. Trout, unable longer to conceal so choice a morsel, whispered in Mrs. Weldon's ear her suspicions as to Felicia's true parentage. To the speaker's astonishment, her listener, instead of snapping out the expected reproof, thought intently for a moment, and then asked: "Does Mrs. Alden take the child to church?"

"Yes, every Sunday, — but — but —" the other gasped, when she could recover sufficient speech, "what's that to do with what I was saying? Why, actually, the younger Miss Timberlake tells me —"

"I don't care to hear what Bessie Timberlake told you. She is a simpering idiot," said Mrs. Weldon with decision. "And I prefer not to discuss Mrs. Alden any more just now. How are your pole-beans growing? I heard you had planted a row in the place where you always had scarlet runners. For myself, I wouldn't consider the change an improvement."

Next Sunday old M^r's Weldon was in church. It was the fourth Sunday after Maris' coming, and she, as Mrs. Trout had said, was a regular attendant. Visual curiosity having had already four full meals from the Brue pew was the more eager to turn and batten upon Mrs. Weldon. After her long life in Orbury, this was literally her first visit to the aristocratic Episcopal church. Indeed, since her husband's death, she had gone to no church. People had become used to the thought that she was embittered by her great grief, and was not amenable to the consolations of religion. This heresy had been tacitly forgiven, and now the sudden appearance of the valiant old lady, demure and at ease in their pious midst, made even the worthy Mr. Carr bungle his reading of the first lesson.

On the Tuesday afternoon following this memorable Sabbath day, Maris and Felicia in the garden, as usual, were kneeling side by side on a tattered strip of matting, talking and setting out violet bushes. At first every motion that Maris gave was faithfully copied by the apprentice. The child's love for nature and for garden work was sincere and instinctive. Soon Maris noted that the fingers of Felicia's left hand were still far from being equal to the task now imposed, and, with a mother's tact, she suggested a division of labor, — Felicia to precede her along the matting with a trowel and dig holes, while she, Maris, followed with the pigmy bushes. This went on in silence for moments, then Felicia paused, and straightened herself to look complacently backward down the long growing line of green. Her eyes happened to fall upon Maris' grimy hands. She gazed at them steadily then, with a hurt intonation, said: "Lady, your hands is awful black. I never seen — never saw them dirty before."

"Oh, that is nothing," laughed Maris. "They'll wash. And flowers, you know, don't like it if you wear gloves to plant them. They think you're snobbish, and then they won't grow for you."

Felicia's small brows knitted with the burden of this thought, then slowly her face cleared. "I reckon that's so," she said. "Ef I was a flower, I wouldn't like it. An' Lady," she added shyly, "these here vi'lets sholy ought to be big an' sweet, when it's yo' hands is gettin' dirty plantin' them."

"You darling!" said Maris, and smiled at her in the way that made Felicia tremble with the pure joy of it. "You don't think there is anybody quite like 'Lady,' do you?"

"And there ain't — there isn't, — not *no*-body —" Felicia began, excitedly, when the sound of the gate latch caused both gardeners to turn.

The white head and widow's bonnet of Mrs. Weldon rose above the hedge. She seemed to be looking toward Maris, but, not recognizing her, Maris stooped over the violets as Felicia had just done.

The slow shuffling steps, and the click, click of a brass-shod cane sounded slowly up the long brick walk. Unconsciously the two workers listened for its reverberation on the porch-flooring, and then a passing into the house; but no, it had turned, and was coming into the garden toward them. "Tap, tap, tap," on the new-gravelled paths, "just like a great big woodpecker," whispered the child.

Maris sprang up, her cheeks flushing with the surprise, her soil-stained hands held out a little ruefully. As she advanced, she looked, now at her hands, now at the visitor, and said: "I am very glad to see you. I can't shake hands, they are so dirty. You see, I've been digging."

Mrs. Weldon smiled. "That's all right. Dirt from a garden is better than shaking hands with anybody. I am Mrs. Weldon, — 'Old M'is Weldon' they call me now. I knew your mother in her girlhood. I've come now to see you and little Felicia."

"I thank you for coming," said Maris. "Shall we go indoors, or —" she turned to wave a grimy hand toward the garden, letting the gesture speak for her.

"Out here. I didn't call upon the Misses Timberlake. There is something special that I have to say to you. Is there not an old bench about here, somewhere?"

She looked about. "Yes," said Maris. "It is over there at the end of a narrow pathway. There used to be an arbor covered with roses."

"I remember it," said Mrs. Weldon.

Maris walked slowly on beside her guest. A thrill of something that resembled apprehension passed through her. She had heard much of the indomitable courage of the old dame. She glanced up just a little timidly. Mrs. Weldon gazed straight before her. The strong old face with its deep lines of pain under the thread-white hair, had the look of a snow-touched cliff fronting an eternal sea. At least there would be no idle curiosity, no petty personal satisfactions derived from the questions she might ask. Maris drew herself together. Catechism from this source were formidable indeed.

"Mrs. Alden," began the other, directly they were seated, "nearly fifty years ago I first came into this state of yours. I have never since been out of it. I feel now as if it were mine as much as the native born, — but my first experiences were not pleasant. Among those trying first years the brightest thing I can recall, — next to my dear husband's love, —

was the friendship of a young girl." She paused. "Can you not imagine who I mean?"

"It must have been my mother," answered Maris, her own eyes beginning to glow.

"Yes, and it is for her sake that I have come, — hers and her little namesake there, — Felicia," she nodded slightly toward the child, "that I have been forward enough to come."

Maris' heart began to flutter. She twisted her hands together, and yet she found no answer ready. "I thought I had guessed your secret," said Mrs. Weldon in a lower tone. "Now I am sure of it!" Maris went white. She leaned back a little, and as if to cover her, the older woman bent forward and called out to Felicia: "Felicia, child. Will you please gather me a little nosegay of those pale roses over in that corner?" She pointed to a distant spot.

Felicia's inquiring eyes went straight to Maris. The latter nodded and tried to smile. "Yes, go. Get quite a large bunch, darling."

This she managed to say with some appearance of self-control, but the moment the child's back was turned, she grasped her companion's arm and whispered, fiercely: "My secret! What do you mean by thinking I have a secret?"

"That is your own child," said the other slowly, her eyes following Felicia's small, erect figure. "I went to church last Sunday just to see you two together. I saw your eyes as you looked at her. God lets only mothers look like that. You thought her dead or lost forever, and did not find her until after your second marriage. It is Mr. Alden who has bound you to secrecy even here, among your own people."

Maris covered her face and rocked to and fro. "I cannot speak. I cannot ease my heart of it,"

she moaned. Afterward, in a more frightened voice, her eyes again on the elder face, she asked: "Is what you are saying generally believed in Orbury?"

"No, not believed at all, only hinted at; and I shall make it my business to see that the hints are stopped. Your old friends resent your secretiveness, my dear, and that is only natural. They do not know the type of man that Mr. Alden is. I think I do. You see I was born a Northerner. From his point of view he is perfectly right in making you keep silence. It is his pride that does it, and he cannot realize, being a man, what silence may be costing you." Suddenly, with one of her quick, decisive changes, she turned, looked hard into Maris' face, and asked, almost sharply: "Do you love your husband?"

For an instant Maris stared in amazement, then the power, the sincerity, the concentrated questioning of the older face swept away all artificial pretence.

"I adore him! I *adore* him!" cried Maris passionately. "Even with my child restored, there are moments when I could tear my living heart out with my hands, and fling it toward the place where he is. I think that no other woman ever loved as I love him!"

"Yes, other women have loved," said old M'is Weldon, and something in the slow, dry words made Maris cry out with the recognition of a grief more terrible than her own. The two women wept silently together, and after an interval the old one sobbed: "Thank God each moment, Maris, that he still lives. There is nothing so awful, so irrevocable as death. No matter what wise ones say, death is the end of joy and hope. But, hush, — you must be brave, — lift your head, dear. Here comes Felicia with my roses."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ON SUNSHINE HILL

WHATEVER the tactics employed by Old M's Weldon, it is certain that Maris' status in the community changed from that hour. People called again, allowed themselves to be pleasantly entertained, and went away saying that, after all, Maris was the same impulsive, kind hearted girl that she had always been, and that her previous aloofness had been due to a natural embarrassment. As for Felicia, they were now content to take her for what she seemed, a rescued mill-waif, and to watch with genuine sympathy and appreciation her constant development. For Felicia was becoming more than a pretty child. Her mind, kept so long dormant in the mill, was growing like a young vine and sending out, on every side, delicate tendrils of curiosity and of interest. Her pride and delight in her own capacity for learning were pathetic. Maris saw that before many years had passed she should need to curb an incessant craving for books. Fortunately there was already existent a counterweight against the tendency to curl up in a corner and read fairy tales, and this was in the little girl's intense love of nature. Maris kept her in the air as much as possible, and fostered tactfully her love for outdoor life.

In these perfect June days they fell into the way of taking long country walks together for the purpose

of bringing back wild flowers. Felicia was indefatigable in searching out new species, and these she would root up, conveying them tenderly to her own small wild garden to which a corner in the old Brue yard was dedicated. Maris read her of Wordsworth and a similar nook planted by him and Emmeline,

“Dear spot, which we have watched with tender heed,
Bringing thee chosen plants and blossoms blown
Among the distant mountains, flower and weed
Which thou hast taken to thee as thine own
Making all kindness registered and known, —”

It was a wise choice of Maris' when she took the gentle singer of Grasmere to be her child's guide into a world of poetry. His lines, once loved, never entirely disappear from the texture of a soul, and by degrees the child, for whom all forms of beauty and sweetness passed naturally into a life where Maris was the guiding spirit, began to think of Wordsworth as a dear absent friend of “Lady,” and, afterward, by slower process, to merge his image into that of the white haired minister, Dr. Singleterry.

Once on a day that had been especially clear and beautiful, she came in to Maris late in the afternoon, bringing with her a small bunch of white clove pinks.

“Oh, what a lot of darlings, — did you pick them for Lady?” asked Maris above her sewing. She was just putting the finishing touches to a dainty frock for Felicia.

“No,” answered the child, showing some hesitation but keeping her beautiful, upraised eyes unfalteringly on those of Maris, “I want you to go with me to the old minister, — you know who I mean, — in the churchyard. I picked these from my garden for him. I remembered what you said, —

that first day. I won't be skeered, — frightened — now, Lady."

A little excursion that Maris had long held out as the object of some special occasion was one to a hill at some distance from the town. Mr. Brue had taken the child Maris to it first when the slopes were covered thickly with the wild dwarf sunflower, and at the beautiful sight Maris had cried out that it was "Sunshine Hill." The pretty name had held between herself and her father all through their life together. She had been waiting for the time of sunflower blossoming that she might take her own child there. Also a small waterfall plashed and gurgled near. Felicia had never seen a waterfall.

A day was finally allotted. Maris hired, in advance, an old-fashioned top buggy drawn by a horse so gentle that, as its owner declared, "Ole Jeff wouldn't run away, not ef he came up from behind an' shoved hisself!" She had refused the services of a driver. This was to be a private picnic, she told Felicia, just for the two.

The Misses Timberlake contributed such a luncheon as only the old fashioned housewife can prepare. Fried chicken, sandwiches of the most delicate ham, small stuffed birds, beaten biscuit, jams, doughnuts, and a dozen other appetizing fancies. At ten the expedition was ready to start.

Maris had just lifted the reins preparatory to slapping the ancient animal upon his flanks when the postman, coming up from the town, halloed and waved a white missive in the air. In the excitement of preparation Maris had forgotten that this was one of the days for receiving a letter from Ruth, and these, it scarcely need be said, came as regularly upon the appointed day as if they had been weather bulletins. Maris waited, smiling, until the postman

reached her, took the letter, thanked him, and, after a glance to assure herself that it was from Ruth indeed, tucked it into her belt and drove away.

During the dark early weeks of her stay in Orbury these letters had been, to Maris, a source of greatest help and strength. Now, in the brightening outlook they were still deeply treasured. Her love for her husband's sister was rooted fast in gratitude, and Ruth's knowledge of it did not detract from her own answering affection. The two women wrote almost exclusively of Felicia, a subject of which Ruth, no less than Maris, seemed never to tire. Harvey often sent messages and suggestions as to the child's physical well being, and the continued care of her injured arm. Dwight's name was not mentioned, although in such general statements as, "We are all well and busy, as usual," or "The new mill-overseer is doing splendidly. We are all interested in mill work, now," Maris knew that it was meant for her to read between the lines of Dwight's courageous taking up of immediate burdens.

The fact that these letters had been written in the house where Dwight lived, that his fingers might possibly have touched the envelope before it was sent to her, brought always to Maris a thrill, followed by one of those short, sharp struggles of despair that left her drained for a while alike of hope and of vitality. The letter now against her heart seemed, at one moment to warm, and, an instant later, to chill it into ice. Images and thoughts of her husband would not vanish, even before the ever changing beauty of the scenes around her, or at the sound of Felicia's innocent and delighted chatter. Even as the mother in Maris forced herself into some sort of adequate response to the child's questions, the suffering wife was crying, dumbly, "Oh, for one sight of

him, — a touch of his hand! At times like this I would give heaven and earth if they were mine to give, — I would barter my soul, — yes, — and this child beside me, — just for another hour of love with him!" She knew that the first agony of the mood would slowly fade. In the meantime she sat upright, guiding the horse mechanically, and striving hard to listen to Felicia.

The country was at the very height of summer beauty. Tobacco and corn stretched out in lines of light. Felicia was excited and interested to learn that the long rows of insignificant green vines studded thickly with yellow flowers, were peanuts, and that, in the autumn one could dig out the little twisted nuts like roots. Sumac, iron-weed and golden-rod, the latter not yet in bloom, grew lush in the corners of the "zigzag" fences, and there were summer flowers at hand that made Felicia cry aloud, "Can't we stop, — just *one* minute? See that big bouquet of growing pink flowers over there, Lady?" or, when they were passing through a copse on the crest of an incline which made Maris shudder with recollections of gaunt Red Horse Hill, "There are two kinds of flowers, — two whole kinds, — Lady: — that we've never sawed — seed — no, *seen* before, — can't we get just those two?"

But for once Maris proved inexorable. "No, we started out for Sunshine Hill, and we must not stop until we reach it," she would say, with a smile that took away all sting from the refusal.

A little later Maris gave a start and leaned forward. "We are nearly there, Felicia. When we pass under that bending hickory tree it will be the first hill to the left. Now shut your eyes until I tell you to open them, and whatever you do, don't peep!"

Felicia obeyed, pressing her hands down on her

lids for added safety. The small body was now perched on the very edge of the buggy seat; Maris could feel how the child shivered with excitement. By this, the mother had won through her dark mood, and could think of the coming vision. The horse crept with irritating deliberation over the sandy road, the old wheels creaked and grated as Maris turned quite sharply to the left, then the buggy came to a standstill, and Maris said "Look!"

At first Felicia could only gasp. The hill ran up in a tilted sheet of gold to a sky-line that was blue and tangible as a wall of turquoise stones. The flowers so closely set that each, it would seem, touched finger tips with a dozen flaunting neighbors, wove a continuous tapestry of bloom. Butterflies, yellow and black like huge detached blossoms, danced in the breeze above.

As Felicia still remained silent Maris turned, in some apprehension, to look at her. The small face was pale and solemn.

"Didn't I tell you it would be beautiful?" the mother asked.

"Yes," murmured Felicia. "But when you show me things so awful beautiful I want to cry."

"No tears allowed to-day," cried Maris gaily, and laughed to cover her own emotion. "Let us get out, and tie old slow-coach to a sapling, — then we can go in swimming in a sea of gold."

At first Felicia would not move among the flowers for fear of hurting them, but when Maris was half way across the valley the child plunged in, and was soon laughing to see the way the flower-waves closed in behind her.

Maris was moving steadily toward the waterfall. Suddenly Felicia stopped. "What is that, Lady? It sounds like water running."

"It is," said Maris, "A little waterfall. I used to call it Undine. When we are over there beside it I will tell you the story of Undine."

"But who could bring so much water 'way out here?" asked Felicia.

Maris only smiled, but her lips, for a moment, quivered with something that was not altogether mirth. Then she led Felicia over the brow of the hill and downward by a path she knew to a tiny gorge held in by gray rocks where a thin fall of water slid and splashed, then spread out softly into an oval pool.

Felicia was again speechless, but she pressed close to Maris, slipping an arm about her waist. Across the pool a single spray of blue lobelia stood, the vivid color giving it a curious alertness. It seemed to be arrested suddenly in flight, poised thus, to stare at the human intruders. Felicia had eyes but for the falling water. "It's a comin' all the time," she whispered. "It's a comin' and a comin', — and yet there is not any machinery near it."

With a sound half sob, half laugh, Maris sank to the warm earth bearing the child with her, and when little hysterical laughs and attacks of spasmodic caressing allowed her to speak, she tried to explain to Felicia the origin and necessities of waterfalls. When the listener, nodding gravely, said that she understood, the mother passed on to the much more familiar ground of fairy lore, telling of water nymphs and naughty pixies that live in streams and hide under bridges in order to decoy the unwary; and finally entering upon the legend of the hapless Undine. This tale had always been specially dear to Maris. She gave it now with lingering tenderness, enjoying her own recital.

Felicia had thrown herself downward, and placed

her head in her mother's lap. As she talked Maris twined, incessantly, her nervous fingers in the child's soft hair. It was fine and silky as the down of milkweed.

"And some day, darling," she said in closing, "If things don't go too badly with us perhaps I can take you to Undine's country, to that far, magic Rhine, and show you just where the little boat was drifting when a Rhine fairy reached up to steal Bertha's necklace."

Felicia said nothing. Her breathing was that of a babe asleep. Maris, bending over, saw that indeed she slept. For a long time the mother brooded, her eyes fixed on the face of the child. Warmth and life and color had come back to it. The little injured arm now crossed upon the sleeper's breast would never be entirely free from a memory of its terrible accident, but the disfigurement would not be very noticeable. "Long gloves will hide it when she goes to parties," thought Maris, mother like.

But would she ever go to parties? And what, after all, was the future into which they together, she and Felicia, must look?

The unhappy thoughts, held for a while at bay, crept out again from shadows of the silence, and peeped from dark edges of the little pool. The face of Dwight Alden was reflected there. His eyes seemed to stare mournfully upon her. Maris bit her lip hard. She could not stir for fear of waking Felicia. Was there no way of shattering phantoms?

She recalled suddenly Ruth's letter at her belt. This she drew out carefully. When it was in her hand and before she had made an attempt to open it, a queer thing happened. As though a voice had spoken it the knowledge came to her that there would be news of Martin. Hitherto she had been successful in keep-

ing him from her mind, and this sudden onslaught of memory, so to speak, fell on her unawares, like an enemy from ambush. Yet, the strange premonition told her, it was not to be bad news. For an instant the yellow hill side, the rod of blue lobelia and the oval of the pool whirled in the air about her. She dug her hands hard in the soil to keep from swooning, and stared down fixedly upon Felicia, — upon Martin's child. Slowly her reason came back to her, and she now took out a hat pin and began, noiselessly to slit the envelope. To take out the letter cautiously was a more difficult task. She saw that it was a short one. This alone was unusual and betokened news. No writing at all appeared on the outer sheet. Maris was forced, for a moment, to lay the letter down. She bit her lips in annoyance at the way her hands were trembling.

Upon the grass the folded sheet opened as if of itself, and Maris, staring, half terrified, half fascinated, read the opening words, — "The man Winch is dead."

She tried to read no further, but shut her eyes tightly and prayed for strength. She felt that the one thing she could not endure would be to have Felicia wake and begin to question. In spite of her agonized precautions for remaining still the sensitive child stirred, moaned once or twice, and, before settling back to sleep flung out her left arm across the grass. By a coincidence the hand fell, palm upward, upon the letter, spreading it wide. The closing lines showed in the shadow, and Maris, after one shuddering glance, had seen the name "Dwight." It was a message from him, doubtless, — and Martin, whose foul life held them apart, was dead.

The woman sat immovable as stone. Even her trembling had ceased. The yellow blossoms stood

up straight and tall on every side. The sun came down in a fine mist of gold. From out of the thicket, beyond the pool, a thrush called softly, — once, — and then again. Far off his wandering mate gave answer.

- Then Maris slowly bent her head and let her eyes take in the words, "Dwight leaves on the morning's train for you and for — Felicia."

THE END.



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